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NEW NICK CARTER WEEKLY

THE MAN WHO VANISHED

Nick's whistle sounded with piercing shrillness. At the same time he sent the table crashing to the floor, while at the window the detective's aids appeared.

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Inside Front Cover

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NEW NICK CARTER WEEKLY

REG. U. S. PAT. OFF.

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The Man Who Vanished;

OR,

NICK CARTER'S CRAFTIEST FOE.

Edited by CHICKERING CARTER.

CHAPTER I.

A WOMAN'S CRAFTY GAME.

It was one o'clock when Nick Carter, in response to an urgent telephone summons, walked into the office of Whitney & Blair, on the second floor of a large office building in Broad Street.

The firm, consisting of Arthur Whitney and Richard Blair, the latter a nervous, demonstrative bachelor of nearly sixty, did a banking and brokerage business along very conservative lines, and their word on the Street was as good as their bond. Nobody questioned the integrity and stability of Whitney and Blair.

Nick found only two persons in the other office, a young man at work on the books, evidently a sub-clerk, and a graceful, attractive girl seated at a typewriter.

Before the detective could question either of them, however, the junior partner of the firm appeared at the open door of an interior office, exclaiming impulsively when he saw Nick:

"Here he is, Whitney! Thank the Lord he's arrived! Come in, Mr. Carter; come into the private office. There's the devil to pay here."

"Well, I'm sorry to hear that, Mr. Blair," Nick calmly rejoined, as he complied. "Good morning, Whitney. What's the trouble?"

"Possibly, Nick, an April-fool's trick, this being the first of the month," said Arthur Whitney, who was much less disconcerted than his elderly partner. "If not that, however, I fancy that we have been robbed, cleaned out of government bonds to the tune of ninety thousand dollars."

"H'm, is that so?" queried Nick, more gravely. "When did you make the discovery?"

"Hardly ten minutes ago. We telephoned to you immediately."

"Whom do you suspect?"

Our head clerk, John Talbot."

"A traitor in the camp, eh? What are the particulars? State them briefly, if you please."

Nick glanced into a steel vault built into one of the walls, in front of which he had found Whitney standing. There were no signs of a break, however, and the banker waved Nick to a chair and proceeded to explain.

"It may be told in a nutshell," he began. "I went out with Blair about eleven o'clock, Nick, to meet a

woman who, we supposed, wanted to buy the entire lot of bonds."

"What woman?"

"She is one Miss Genevieve Damon, of Washington, D. C."

"An acquaintance?"

"Oh, no; a stranger," said Whitney, with a head shake. "She called here two days ago, when Blair talked with her. I was absent at the time. She stated that she recently had received a legacy of one hundred thousand dollars, and thought she wanted to invest it in government bonds. She was not quite decided, however, and after talking with Blair, she said she would inform us definitely this morning, and asked him if he would hold the bonds for her until to-day."

"I consented, of course," Blair put in nervously. "My talk with the woman convinced me that she would buy them. I hadn't a doubt of it."

"I understand," Nick nodded. "Go on, Mr. Whitney."

"This morning," Whitney proceeded, "Miss Damon talked with us by telephone, stating that she had taken a severe cold and could not leave her apartments. She is stopping at the G—— House during a brief visit to New York. I did not doubt her statements, for I could hear her cough violently while at the phone."

"What did she want of you?" asked Nick

"She said she had about decided to buy the bonds, but first would like to talk with both members of our firm. She asked whether we would call on her about noon, stating that she would, in all probability, complete the deal and give us her check after the conference. She said she wanted to wind up the business to-day, if at all, as she intended leaving for Washington early to-morrow morning, if her cold permitted."

"Did you visit her?"

"Yes, certainly," said Whitney. "Naturally, we hoped to make the sale, and I thought the chance worth taking. We went up to the hotel at noon and found Miss Damon in her apartment. She had mentioned the number of her suite, by the way, and we went to it without stopping at the hotel office."

"Suite two hundred and twelve, Mr. Carter," Blair put in. "That was the number."

"What was the result of your visit, Whitney?" questioned Nick.

"It was entirely satisfactory. Miss Damon asked a good many questions, apparently not being familiar with such business, and finally made the purchase."

"And paid for the bonds?"

"Yes, to be sure. She gave us a certified check on a Washington trust company for one hundred thousand dollars, and asked us to send the bonds and our check for the balance to her Washington address by express. She added that we need not send them until after her check had been honored, which, of course, convinced me that she was entirely trustworthy."

"It did, eh?"

"Certainly," bowed Whitney, deaf to Nick's dry intonation. "Here is the check she gave me. I think it's all right, of course."

"Possibly."

"Upon returning, we found that Talbot had gone out about noon, carrying one of our leather satchels and without stating where he was going. I thought it rather curious, for I knew of no business calling him away from the office; but I found the vault locked and supposed he would soon return. Much to my dismay upon opening the vault, however, I discovered that the bonds were missing."

"The entire lot?"

"Yes."

"Anything else?"

"No."

"You think Talbot has robbed you?"

"I don't know what to think," Whitney declared.

"Robbed us—of course he has robbed us!" Blair cried impetuously. "What else has he done? There was no occasion for him to take the bonds from the vault. He knew where we had gone and that we expected to sell them. He has seized this opportunity to bolt with the whole business and——"

"Stop a bit!" Nick interrupted. "Answer a few questions for me. He may not be as black as you think."

"Black!" Hang it, Carter——"

"Oh, dry up, Dick," Whitney protested sharply. "Don't lose your head and go over the traces. What do you want to know, Nick. I'll answer your questions."

Blair subsided reluctantly, and Nick began a string of rapid-fire questions.

"How long has Talbot been in your employ?"

"About five years."

"How old is he?"

"About fifty."

"Married?"

"No."

"Habits good?"

"So far as we know."

"Does he speculate?"

"Not openly. It would be contrary to our orders. We will not employ a man who dabbles in stocks."

"Some doctors don't like their own medicine," Nick observed slyly. "Are there any other negotiable securities in the vault, or any money?"

"No such securities, Nick, but about twelve hundred dollars in cash."

"Evidently, then, Talbot overlooked the cash, or——"

"Overlooked nothing!" Blair cried derisively. "How could he overlook anything under his very eyes? The money was in the same compartment as the bonds."

"And it would have been very useful to a robber seeking safety in flight," supplemented Nick significantly. "I do not think, gentlemen, that Talbot has robbed you. It looks very much as if there is more to the case."

"What do you mean?"

"Who was here when Talbot went out?"

"Johnson, another clerk, and our stenographer, Miss Vail."

"Have you questioned them?"

"Yes. Neither can give us any information, except that Talbot went out about noon, carrying a leather satchel. He did not say for what, nor where he was going. That would not have been unusual, however, even if his designs were perfectly legitimate, for he is a very reserved and taciturn man. He seldom speaks unless spoken to. That's all they can tell us."

"I'm not so sure of it," said Nick. "Call one of them in here."

A word from Whitney brought both clerks into the private office, and Nick turned to the young lady and asked:

"What is your name?"

"Margaret Vail, sir," she replied, coloring.

"And yours, young man?"

"Frank Johnson."

"I want the home address of both," said Nick, taking out his notebook and entering those readily given him. "Now, Miss Vail, have you told your employers all that you know about the absence of Mr. Talbot?"

"Yes, sir, I have," bowed the girl. "I only know that he went out just before twelve. I haven't the slightest idea why he went, or where he was going."

"What do you say, Johnson?"

"I say the same, sir."

"Where was he at work after the departure of the firm this morning?"

"Here in the private office, sir."

"I left him making a list of the securities in the vault," said Whitney. "We do so the first of each month."

"Did he receive any visitors, Mr. Johnson, while alone here?"

"No sir. Nobody called from the time the firm went out until Talbot departed."

"How long was that?"

"Less than an hour."

"Did he receive any mail, a telegram, or use the telephone?"

"Only the telephone, sir. I heard him talking with some one," Johnson quickly asserted, while Miss Vail corroborated him with a nod.

"Ah, that is significant," said Nick. "Something he heard may have led him to go out with the bonds. Do you know what he said, or with whom he was talking?"

"Neither, sir. The door of the private office was closed."

"H'm, that's too bad."

"I heard his voice, nevertheless, also the ringing of the telephone bell."

"Well, well, that helps," cried Nick. "Somebody must have called up this office, or Talbot himself. If he had made the call, the bell would not have rung."

"Very true, sir."

"Did he leave soon after using the phone?"

"In about five minutes."

"Did he appear nervous, or hurried?"

"I saw nothing of the kind. Did you, Mag?"

"No," said Miss Vail, when appealed to thus abruptly. "I hardly noticed him, in fact."

Nick felt reasonably sure that both were telling the truth. Nevertheless, regarding each more sharply, he asked quite pointedly:

"Which of you has mentioned to any outsider the fact that this batch of bonds was here? Admit it frankly, if you have done so."

"Indeed, sir, I have done nothing of the kind," Miss Vail protested, coloring indignantly. "I wouldn't be guilty of such an indiscretion."

"Nor would I, sir," Johnson declared. "I'll swear that I have not mentioned them."

"That's all," said Nick, waving both from the room.

"I think, Carter, that they are perfectly honest," Whitney said gravely.

"Very likely," Nick admitted. "Nevertheless, assuming that Talbot, also, is honest, and that he may have gone somewhere with the bonds in response to a telephone request, or order, as now seems quite probable, you will admit that the order must have come from some person who knew that the bonds were here."

"By gracious, that's true!" Whitney allowed, at once impressed by Nick's forcible argument.

"Would Talbot have been likely to obey such an order," added the detective; "unless it came from one of you?"

"No, surely not."

"Call up the G—— House, Blair," Nick said abruptly. "See if you can get Genevieve Damon on the phone."

Blair hastened to comply, but the attempt proved vain.

It could be learned only that Miss Damon was not in her apartments.

"It is about the lunch hour," Whitney suggested, though his waning color betrayed his more serious misgivings. "She may have gone down to the dining room."

"She may have gone so much farther, Whitney, that we shall have a devil of a job to lay hands on her," Nick grimly answered, starting to his feet. "Put on your coat and hat and go with me."

"To the G—— House?"

"Exactly. In the meantime, Blair, you remain here, in case I wish to phone you. Send a wire to that Washington trust company, too, and ask if Miss Damon has a deposit, or is known there. I'll bet dollars to fried eggs they never heard of her."

"Good heavens!" Blair gasped. "You don't suspect——"

"Oh, there's nothing to it, as matters now stand," Nick interrupted. "You had those bonds in your vault. A woman called two days ago, pretending that she might want to buy them a little later. To-day she summoned both of you to her hotel, with a flimsy pretense that a cold precluded her coming here. You took the bait like a couple of hungry trout. Having thus lured both of you away from your office, she, or possibly rascals in league with her, phoned to your head clerk, and using one of your names, instructed him to bring the bonds to her apartments. She told you the number of her suite, you said."

"Yes, when she phoned."

"And you mentioned it to Talbot, no doubt, when you told him where you were going."

"Yes, yes; he was here while I talked with her," said Whitney, now gone quite pale. "He knew the number and why we were going there."

"Bah!" Nick ejaculated. "Wasn't it perfectly natural, then, that Talbot should obey an order purporting to come from you and instructing him to bring the bonds to the G—— House, suite two hundred and twelve, eh? He would have done so without the slightest suspicion. To whom else but you, knowing you to be there, would he have attributed such an order?"

"By Jove, I fear you're right," said Whitney, hurriedly putting on his overcoat. "We'll go up there at once. We may find him, or——"

"Find what's left of him, you mean," Nick forcibly interrupted. "He may be down and out, or—well, well, we'll soon see!"

"I'll send for a cab."

"Cab be hanged," Nick growled. "My auto is at the door. We can run up there in five minutes. Wire to Washington at once, Blair, and I'll get you on the phone a little later."

"I'll do so, surely."

"Come on, Whitney. I want a first look at the evidence in suite two hundred and twelve; otherwise, I'd phone to the hotel manager. We shall lose only few moments, however, if we clip the speed limit."

CHAPTER II.

THE CHANGED PLATES.

Nick Carter hurried Whitney from his office while speaking, and down to a speedy touring car that stood at the curb. Springing into the tonneau with the banker, Nick gave the chauffeur his instructions, and they soon were bowling up Broadway at a rate of speed inviting arrest—and avoided only because the famous detective was recognized by each and every startled officer, and the occasion for his haste quickly appreciated.

"I fear you are on the wrong track, Nick," Whitney said apprehensively, after a few moments.

"Why so?" Nick inquired bluntly.

"Because crooks, if the knavery is what you suspect, would not have ordered Talbot to bring the bonds to Miss Damon's apartments. I was there with Blair until half past twelve, or half an hour after Talbot left our business office. The rascals would not have taken a chance of his arriving before we left."

"Very true," Nick grimly admitted. "They took no such chance."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that they made sure that he did not go to the woman's rooms until after you had left. Either that, or took other steps to accomplish their object, assuming that my other deductions are correct. I'll soon ferret out the truth after reaching the hotel."

"I hope so, I'm sure."

"One thing already is sure—that Talbot would not have taken the bonds anywhere except to the woman's apartments, where he supposed you to be."

"Yes, that's true."

"How long, by the way, have you had this batch of bonds?"

"Only four days."

"H'm, is that so? Where did you get them?"

"From Staley & Company, the brokers."

"Brokers, eh? Bucket shop concern, isn't it?"

"Well, yes, I guess that's about the size of it."

"How did you happen to buy of them?"

"Partly in order to help them out of a hole, though chiefly because they shaded the market price of the bonds a trifle."

"What sort of a hole?" Nick growled suspiciously.

"They were hard hit in the bulge of Monday, and hadn't the cash to make good to their customers," Whitney explained. "They had this lot of bonds, however, but it was after banking hours and they could not easily realize on them. Staley called on me, offering me the bonds at a half under the market, if I would help him out, and I saw a profit in doing so. I let him have what cash he wanted and gave our check for the balance."

"Had he ever appealed to you before in that way?"

"No; never. It was the profit that chiefly appealed to me, however."

"Yes, I see," Nick rejoined, with a subtlety too fine for his companion.

It was nearly two o'clock when the car stopped in front of the G—— House. Nick led Whitney through the office and straight to the nearest elevator.

"You know where the suite is located," he muttered. "We'll find out what's doing there before creating a stir."

"We shall need a key, in case the door is locked and the bird flown."

"Leave the door to me," Nick quietly returned. "I'll fool any lock in this place."

Whitney smiled oddly and said no more. Arriving on the third floor, he led the way through a long corridor and stopped at a closed door near one of the stairways, which enabled him to distinctly remember the location of Genevieve Damon's apartments.

"This is the door, Nick," he said quietly. "It is numbered, you see."

Nick glanced at a small metal plate on the door, nearly as high as his head, and read the number, 212. He saw that the corridor was deserted, and he knocked sharply on the door.

It brought no response from within.

"Nothing doing," he said tersely, crouching to peer through the keyhole.

"She may have only stepped out."

"Flew out, Whitney, would hit it nearer," said Nick. "We'll go in and see."

"I think we'd better call the room clerk."

"Room clerk be hanged. I'm good enough room clerk."

Nick had found that the door was locked and the key removed. With a picklock selected from a ring of keys taken from his pocket, he quickly shot the bolt and opened the door.

No shocking spectacle met his gaze when he entered; no senseless man brutally clubbed and robbed, nor even a sign of violence.

The chamber was deserted, as well as an adjoining bedroom and bathroom. The bed had not been made, but the windows were closed, the curtains partly drawn, and the several rooms had been put in fairly good order. On a table in the parlor were several newspapers and a magazine, and these appeared to be the only tokens left by the departed occupant.

"She's gone, Nick, as sure as fate," said Whitney, glancing around while the detective closed the door.

"I expected it," Nick replied. "Are you sure this is the suite in which you saw her?"

"Yes, absolutely. These papers and the magazine were lying on the table while I was talking with her."

"Did you notice any luggage here?"

"Yes. There was a russet leather bag in that corner near the bureau."

"Probably all she brought," said Nick. "We shall find that she paid in advance, Whitney, and that she flew the coop without showing herself in the hotel office. She bolted very soon after the trick was turned, no doubt, and her russet bag probably contained your batch of bonds."

"But, hang it, what has become of Talbot, in that case?" Whitney demanded perplexedly. "He would not have been fool enough to give her the bonds and take her word that we had instructed him to do so."

"Hardly."

"If she got away with them, as you think, Talbot must have been here."

"Yes, presumably."

"What has become of him, then? There are no signs of violence, nothing to show that he has been knocked out and robbed."

"No, none here," Nick thoughtfully admitted, also somewhat puzzled. "It is a bit mysterious, for fair. I'll have a look in the corridor and question—h'm, what's this?"

As he opened the door, intending to interrogate the elevator man, or some of the hallboys, Nick discovered a few particles of dirt on the corridor carpet.

Crouching to examine them, he found that they were tiny particles of dry varnish, or shellac, which appeared to have broken away from some part of the door, or the casing of it. Starting up, Nick quickly examined the outside of the door, and presently discovered that its varnished surface was slightly marred near the metal plate bearing the number of the suite, also that the plate did not set quite close against the wood.

"What have you found?" inquired Whitney, approaching.

"The key to the mystery."

"No?"

"Yes," Nick bluntly insisted, taking out his knife. "Notice these flecks of dry varnish on the floor. They dropped from around this metal plate, which has been removed this morning. Here are scratches made by a knife, which was forced under the plate to pry it off. Yes, by Jove, the spindles yield quite easily and—there you have it!"

Nick had removed the plate while speaking, and now displayed the back of it, on which were two short spindles that held it on the door when driven into the wood.

Whitney stared, further perplexed by this evidence, and amazed at the celerity with which Nick was picking up a trail that only the keenest of eyes would have detected.

"The plate removed!" he exclaimed. "But with what object?"

"Bah!" Nick ejaculated. "It's as plain as twice two. It was done in order to lure Talbot into the wrong room"

"Wrong room?"

"Exactly. One in which the woman's confederates, one of whom had telephoned for him to bring the bonds to suite two hundred and twelve, were waiting to receive him. This plate was removed and put on the other door, in case he should notice the number when entering."

"Good heavens! Then he must be in one of——"

"One of the near rooms—exactly!" Nick interrupted. "The rascals would have selected one near by, lest Talbot should notice the numbers on the other doors, as he passed them. Any great difference might have caused misgivings. We'll soon find out which one."

"How can you tell——"

"Pshaw!" Nick cut in, hastening to the nearest door. "Another plate must have been removed, in order to substitute this one. They were reversed temporarily and replaced after the job was done. The varnish will show—— Ah! here we have it."

Nick had darted to several of the doors and examined the metal plate on each, while speaking, and suddenly halted at one nearly opposite that of Genevieve Damon's apartments. One glance at the plate confirmed his suspicions. Like scratches, like flecks of varnish on the floor, a perceptible crack between the plate and the door—these plainly told the story.

Nick found the door locked, the key gone, and he knocked loudly.

The response was precisely what he expected—if any was received.

It fell on the ears of both men, as Whitney drew nearer—a half-smothered cry, followed by a prolonged groan of distress.

Nick Carter whipped out his picklock, with an ugly gleam leaping up in his eyes, and quickly opened the door.

CHAPTER III.

THE MISSING HEAD CLERK.

Closely followed by Whitney, Nick Carter rushed into the room.

One glance told the tale, confirmed the detective's every suspicion.

The curtains were closely drawn, the room in disorder, the chairs misplaced and one overturned on the floor.

On another, as empty as a drum, stood the leather bag brought from the office of Whitney & Blair that morning.

On a bed in the adjoining sleeping room lay the banker's head clerk. He was stretched flat on his back. Each wrist and ankle was tightly bound to a

corner post of the bed, holding him in a position that rendered him almost powerless.

A gag had been tied in his mouth. His hair was in disorder, his forehead bruised and cut, while the pillow on which his head rested was soiled with blood. His overcoat had not been removed, but his hat was lying in one corner, with a huge dent showing that one of his assailants had kicked it there.

Nick still had his knife in his hand, and he ran to the bed and quickly cut Talbot's bonds and removed the gag from his mouth.

Though he had recoiled with dismay at first, Whitney hastened to lend his assistance.

"Heavens, this is dreadful!" he exclaimed. "He's not dead, is he?"

"No, he's worth a dozen dead men," said Nick, upon seeing Talbot's dazed eyes turned towards him. "He's been knocked out with a blackjack. That's all."

"That's enough, I should say."

"Now you're all right, old chap," Nick cried, raising the man a little and opening his collar. "Give him a glass of water, Whitney. He's a bit done up, but will catch his breath in a minute. Ah, now you're coming to time."

With a manifest effort, after eagerly drinking the water given him, Talbot succeeded in pulling himself together and sat up on the edge of the bed.

"Yes, I'm not so bad," he said huskily, in reply to Nick's hearty remark. "I'll soon be all right. I was floored by the rascals the moment I entered and took off my hat. They were gone when I revived, leaving me gagged and bound as you found me. I've tried in vain to make some one hear. What time is it? Have the scoundrels got away with the bonds?"

"So far away, Talbot, that nothing is left for us but a stern chase, which is sometimes a long one," Nick replied. "State the main facts as briefly as possible. Did you bring the bonds here in response to a telephone order thought to be from one of the firm?"

"Yes, certainly. I thought it was Mr. Whitney who phoned. The speaker said so, at least, and I did not detect that the voice was that of a stranger."

"He may have imitated Whitney's voice."

"It certainly sounded like his."

"That is a point worth remembering," said Nick. "It shows that one of the crooks must be tolerably well acquainted with Whitney, or he could not imitate his voice."

"The instructions he gave me would have dispelled any ordinary misgivings," said Talbot. "He said that Mr. Blair and he were still with Miss Damon, who had decided to buy the bonds, and that I must bring them to her apartments at once, suite two hundred and twelve, third floor. Knowing the firm had received precisely the same directions less than an hour before, as well as of what their mission consisted, I did not feel the slightest distrust. I at once strapped the bonds in a satchel and came up here."

"Did you go to the hotel office?"

"No. I did not think it necessary. I took the elevator and came up to the third floor, knowing that I could easily locate the suite. I was saved the trouble, however, by a man who was waiting in the corridor."

"H'm, I see," Nick murmured, anticipating what was coming.

"He addressed me very politely, saying that he was Miss Damon's lawyer, and that Mr. Whitney and his partner were waiting for me in her apartments. I had not a thought of evil. I followed him to the door of the suite, observing that it was numbered two hundred and twelve, and entered immediately after him."

"The woman then was detaining you and Blair in the room across the corridor," Nick remarked, with a glance at Whitney.

"True. I now see the whole knavish scheme."

"Did you suspect nothing, Talbot, upon not seeing your employers and the woman?"

"I was given no time for suspicion," Talbot ruefully replied. "A man seated near the door arose when we entered, saying that Miss Damon and the brokers were in the next room, meaning in here."

"Ah, yes," Nick nodded. "That was a blind to get you well into the room, with the door closed, before assaulting you."

"It served all right," Talbot rejoined. "I removed my hat and started to cross the room. The man preceding me drew aside to let me pass, and I was struck down almost at the same moment by his confederate. That's all I can tell you; but it's the truth, Mr. Whitney, and if I have done wrong——"

"Not a bit of it, John," Whitney warmly interrupted, noting the quaver that had crept into his clerk's voice. "I do not blame you in the least, I assure you, and am very sorry for what you have suffered."

"Hang that, sir! I wouldn't mind the knock-out, not in the least, if I hadn't lost the bonds," Talbot quickly cried, with a look of relief.

"If we work sharp, the lost bonds may be recovered," Nick interposed, also feeling sure that Talbot had told the truth.

"God grant it!"

"Now about these scamps," said Nick. "Did you see more than two?"

"No."

"Were they in disguise, or couldn't you tell?"

"I don't think so. Neither wore a beard, nor mustache."

"Describe them."

"One was about twenty-five, short and muscular, with full features, a light complexion and, I think, brown hair. He is the one who struck me, and I had only a glance at him."

"And the other?"

"He was entirely different," Talbot said more impressively. "As a matter of fact, Mr. Carter, I never saw a more striking fellow."

"H'm, is that so?"

"He is nearly forty, I should say; an erect, well-built man of good height. He has wavy dark hair, the least bit gray, a curiously clear complexion, penetrating eyes, and a regular, clean-cut face, of quite classic cast. He wore a dark suit, with frock coat and a silk hat."

Nick Carter pursed his lips thoughtfully for a moment. He recalled such a man as Talbot had just described, but was sure that he could not have had a hand in the crime of that morning.

Whitney echoed the detective's thoughts, so to speak, by exclaiming quickly:

"Gracious, Nick, that's a very good description of the knave who robbed my wife a month ago; that polished rascal—Gaston Dupont."

"Yes, it recalled him to my mind," Nick nodded. "He cuts no ice in this affair, however. He is out of the criminal arena."

"Very true."

"Sing Sing will keep him in the straight and narrow path for a number of years."

"Yes, certainly," Whitney assented. "I did not, of course, think of attributing this crime to Gaston Dupont. Talbot's description merely suggested that accomplished scamp."

It was only a month before that Nick had arrested him, this Gaston Dupont, together with his confederates, for the theft of Mrs. Arthur Whitney's famous jewels. Hardly two weeks had passed, moreover, since Dupont and the entire gang were convicted and sent to Sing Sing for a term of years.

It did appear utterly absurd, therefore, as Whitney had said, to attribute the bond robbery to Gaston Dupont—a knave whose superior ability, craft and daring, whose wily assumptions and audacious nerve, had so impressed Nick that the above description instantly recalled the versatile rascal.

That Dupont then was within the walls of Sing Sing prison, however, Nick had not the shadow of a doubt.

"That's all you can tell me, I judge," he said, abruptly reverting to Talbot.

"I think so, Mr. Carter."

"You heard no names mentioned?"

"Not one."

"H'm, by the way, Whitney, I wish you'd describe Genevieve Damon," said Nick. "You must have had a good look at her."

"Yes, very," Whitney dryly allowed. "She is a woman of thirty-five, or thereabouts, with a fine figure, but of the lithe and willowy type. She can worm herself into graceful attitudes, or a seductive pose, with all the sinuosity of a snake. I really believe Blair, the old rat, was quite smitten with her. I caught him eying her at times with an interest I never saw him betray for a woman."

"She must be pretty, then."

"Yes, indeed. She is a pronounced brunette, with a velvety complexion, a fine mouth and teeth, marvelous eyes, full of light and expression. She has a fine brow, too, and hair that glistens like a raven's wing. Frankly, Nick, to put it tritely, she's a peach."

"Fair fruit is often rotten at the core," Nick replied, rising.

"Are you going?"

"You bet I'm going. We've reached the end of the thread left here by the rascals. I'm going to try to pick it up elsewhere."

"Do so, by all means," cried Whitney, also rising. "I want you to take entire charge of the case."

"Leave it to me," Nick replied assuringly. "I shall at once continue my work on it, but I no longer need your help. Instead, you must return to your office with Talbot and keep quiet about this robbery."

"Quiet?"

"Nothing less. Publicity will not help us. I may derive some little advantage, however, from suppressing the facts for a time, at least. Do you understand?"

"Perfectly," Whitney bowed; "and I will be governed by your instructions."

"I think that's all, then," Nick added. "Leave me to make inquiries in the hotel office, along with all the rest, while you go about your business as if no robbery had occurred. I will see you as soon as I

have anything of importance to report, or if I wish you to deviate from these instructions."

"Very well," said Whitney. "I leave it all to you."

"I fancy you will not regret it," Nick said a bit pointedly. "I'll be off now, and leave you to slip away in company. So long, Talbot. I'll repay with interest that crack on the head the rascals gave you."

"Do so, Mr. Carter," cried the clerk, starting up eagerly. "Make it compound interest, too."

"Trust me for that," laughed Nick, as he withdrew.

CHAPTER IV.

ON THE TRAIL.

Hastening from the suite in which the robbery had been committed, Nick Carter returned to that occupied by Genevieve Damon, which he now felt sure was an alias, only, and he there began a more careful search after evidence that might serve as a clue to the woman's identity, or to subsequently prove her complicity in the crime.

Nick's efforts did not prove entirely vain.

On the floor near one end of the bureau in the bedroom, he found a small tortoise-shell hairpin, evidently inadvertently dropped when the woman was taking down or doing up her hair.

In a wastebasket near by, moreover, among a few torn fragments of wrapping paper, Nick discovered a small twist of glistening black hair, which Miss Damon apparently had combed from her head, then twisted around her finger and tossed into the basket.

Nick wrapped the hair and hairpin in a scrap of the wrapping paper and put them in his pocket.

Having replaced the plate on the door, and learned that that on the opposite suite was numbered 215, Nick went down to the hotel office, where he examined the register and briefly questioned the clerk.

He learned that the occupants of both suites had arrived four days before, the very day on which Whitney had brought the bonds from Staley & Company; also that the guest in suite 215 was registered as James Delano, Newport, R. I., and that, as far as the clerk knew, he was a stranger to Genevieve Damon.

Neither was remembered to have previously been at the hotel.

Each had come alone and without baggage, other than hand satchels, and both had paid a week in advance. The clerk did not know that they had departed, and Nick did not inform him, nor mention the robbery.

Having examined the writing of both on the hotel register, and fixed it in his mind, Nick entered a telephone booth and called up Mr. Blair. He learned from the latter that an answer had been received from the Washington trust company on which Genevieve Damon's check was drawn, and that the check was worthless and no woman of that name known by the company.

Nick had expected no less. It was obvious, now, that Delano and Genevieve Damon, so registered, were confederates in the robbery; and that the crime was the result of a carefully laid plot, executed with skill and daring that proclaimed the crooks to be masters of their knavish art.

That they had left only a slender trail behind them, and had got away safely with the bonds, which could be easily and quickly converted into cash, were equally apparent. Nevertheless, Nick Carter was by no means discouraged, and, as he afterwards put it, went at the case like a bull at a gate.

Leaving the hotel, he returned to his waiting automobile.

"Home, Danny, at a fast clip," he commanded his chauffeur, springing into the tonneau. "We've got a tough case on our hands."

"That so, sir?" Danny glanced over his shoulder with an expressive grin. "It will be a tough one, Mr. Carter, all right, if you're not good for it."

Nick laughed lightly as the car sped away.

Twenty minutes later he was seated in his business office, in company with three of his assistants, Chick Carter, Patsy and Bob Ferret, whom he briefly informed of the robbery and the circumstances involving it.

"Gee! it looks like a hopeless case," was Patsy's comment, when Nick had stated the points of which he felt confident.

"I've known sicker children to live," Nick replied dryly. "One fact, at least, is obvious."

"What's that?" Chick inquired.

"The crooks must have learned from some source that Whitney and Blair had this particular batch of bonds."

"Sure thing, Nick."

"Furthermore, that information was obtained on the very day the bonds were bought from Staley & Company," Nick pointedly added. "The two rooms were secured at the hotel that day, and on the following day Genevieve Damon called on Whitney & Blair,

with her story about a legacy and her wish to invest it in bonds."

"Obviously, then, the plans for the robbery already had been laid."

"Exactly," Nick assented. "That gives rise to a very important point, which appears to be the only promising one on which we can, at present, set to work. From whom did the crooks obtain this information?"

"By Jove, that's the question!" Chick exclaimed, quickly seeing the point.

"It must have been from some one in league with them," put in Patsy.

"That's the very point, and one we may turn to advantage," Nick nodded. "The field, moreover, should be somewhat limited. Naturally, the information should have come from some person in Whitney's office, or in that of Staley & Company."

"That's right, too."

"We'd better get after the whole bunch," said Bob Ferret.

"That is my intention, Bob."

"I thought so."

"Aside from Talbot, whose honesty is apparent, Whitney employs only two persons, Frank Johnson and Margaret Vail. If either of them has been led into this game, it is quite probable that an early settlement with the crooks will be attempted, in which case they may be caught in the act."

"That looks good, surely."

"Be that as it may, Patsy, I want you and Bob to get after this couple when they quit work to-day," Nick instructed. "You take the girl and leave Bob to look after Johnson. Shadow them constantly until you are sure that they are under cover for the night."

"Trust us for that, Mr. Carter."

"As a matter of fact, though they must not be ignored, I do not suspect any knavery on their part," Nick added. "Both impressed me as being honest."

"What about Staley & Company?" asked Chick.

"I really think the information came from their office, possibly from one of the firm," Nick grimly declared. "It consists of Martin Staley and a man named Wade. I don't know his first name. I do know, however, that they do only a bucket-shop business and haven't an enviable reputation. If the recent rise in the market has hit them as hard as Whitney implied, they may have entered into crime to repair their losses."

"Possibly," Chick admitted.

"It is much more probable, Chick, than that one of their clerks has been lured into this crime. That appears in that Staley went personally to Whitney & Blair and prevailed upon them to buy the bonds, offering them under the market price of that day and claiming to be hard pressed for money."

"That's true, Nick. I had overlooked that fact."

"It looks very much as if Staley had tried to force the bonds upon Whitney, knowing that he should recover part of them through this robbery, and thus clean up a few thousands, at least."

"It's a plausible theory, and one worth following up," Chick declared, now more deeply impressed with Nick's forcible argument. "What are your plans?"

"We'll get after both members of the firm, Staley and Wade," replied Nick. "I'll tackle the former, while you look after Wade. They may not leave their office together, or it may be that only Staley is in the game, if either."

"I see."

"It now is nearly three o'clock, but we can reach their office before the stock market closes. They are not likely to leave earlier. We'll pick them up when they go, and keep an eye on them for the rest of the day. If nothing comes of it—well, we'll not figure on that. It will be time enough to plan for to-morrow after failing to-day."

"I believe your story," Chick cried, hastening to make ready.

Nick started Patsy and Bob Ferret in advance, each on the work assigned him; but he left the house with Chick about five minutes later, both in disguise.

Just before three o'clock they sauntered into the building quarters of the suspected firm, two rooms on the second floor of a building in Pine Street. That in front was used for an office, containing several desks at which the clerks were at work, while a larger rear room presented the customary appearance of a stockbroker's board room.

The market was near its closing. The tickers were clicking rapidly. Two lads at the quotation boards were hurriedly putting up the figures of the "last call."

Standing around the room, or lounging on a triple row of settees opposite the boards, some thirty men were noting the changing prices, or talking garrulously of the day's changes and the probable future trend of prices. Many had cigars and a veil of smoke filled the room.

Mingled with the crowd, the two detectives pretended to have dropped in only to watch the market's closing, and they attracted no attention. Nick needed only a glance at the patrons of the place to determine

their character; a collection of cheap sports, picayune speculators, would-be gamblers, pikers and loafers—the scum that tosses in the wake of the monster crafts on the turbulent sea of finance.

It took Nick only a very few moments to discover that both members of the firm were in the front office, and he drew near the door with Chick and sized them up.

Staley was watching the tape from a ticker near one of the windows—a well-built man of forty, smoothly shaved, of florid complexion, and with a pair of narrow, sinister gray eyes.

His partner, Samuel Wade, was figuring at one of the desks, a stocky, dark man of nearly fifty, who evidently was not pleased with the day's business.

"Hard hit again, I reckon," Nick murmured, calling Chick's attention to Wade's grim countenance.

"Right you are, I guess."

"So much the better."

"Why so?"

"Because, if parties to this robbery, the need of money may force them to insist upon an early settlement with the crooks who did the job."

"That's right."

"It's safe to gamble that they did not turn the trick. It was planned and executed by rascals of much more cunning, craft and experience than these fellows possess. H'm, I think there'll be something doing, all right."

Staley had left the ticker and was talking earnestly with Wade, in tones too low to be heard by his clerks, and at the same time was nervously consulting his watch.

Nick sized up these indications correctly, as a matter of fact; but the market closed while he stood watching the two men, and the crowd in the rear room began to troop out of the place.

Nick decided that it would be indiscreet to linger, and he returned to the street with Chick to await the departure of their quarry.

It was nearly five o'clock before either of the brokers put in an appearance, and, as Nick had anticipated, they departed separately. Staley was the first to come out, clad in a dark, light-weight overcoat and a black derby hat. He wore a worried look, also, and walked rapidly up Nassau Street and boarded a subway train at City Hall Square.

Nick was on his track from the start, and occupied the same car.

Staley rode to Forty-second Street, where he left the train and hastened to the Hotel Belmont.

Nick followed him up the broad stairway leading into the spacious office, and saw him approach the business enclosure and ask the clerk a question.

The clerk turned to a rack back of the counter, and, after running partly through a package of letters, gave one to the waiting broker. Staley turned away from the counter, then hurriedly broke the seal and drew out a card, which he eagerly read, then returned it to the envelope and thrust both into the inside breast pocket of his overcoat.

"H'm, that looks good to me," thought Nick, watching him from a chair near the head of the stairs. "He looks relieved and is less nervous. Yet the communication was written only on a card. It may have informed him of the success of the robbery, or it may be an appointment with the robber himself. I'd like to get one glance at it, for fair."

Staley did not leave the hotel. Instead, he bought an evening newspaper, took a chair in an alcove near one of the windows, and began to scan the leader lines on the several pages.

"By Jove, I'll wager that he is looking to see if the robbery has been reported, and to learn the particulars," thought Nick, quick to read the broker's face correctly. "I have fooled him in that, at least. Here seems to be a chance, too, to go a step further."

Approaching the office enclosure, Nick took up a pen as if to register, but quietly spoke to the clerk, instead.

"Betray no surprise, young man," he cautioned, turning the lap of his vest and displaying his badge. "I am Nick Carter and want a little information. Are you wise?"

"Sure thing."

The clerk bowed, smiling, and held his finger on the register as if questioned only concerning some guest of the house.

"Very good," Nick nodded approvingly. "You just gave a letter to Martin Staley, the broker."

"Yes."

"Do you know how long it has been here?"

"It was left here about four o'clock."

"It did not come by mail?"

"No. It was left by a swell chap in a dark suit and a silk hat. He said Staley would call for it."

"H'm, one of Talbot's assailants," thought Nick, at once recalling the description given him. "Do you know the man who left it?"

"I do not. I don't recall having seen him before."

"How long did he remain here?"

"Not more than three minutes. He came in, ad-

dressed one of the house envelopes, then sealed it and left it with me."

"You could identify him, if necessary?"

"Yes, easily."

"That's all, then, thank you," said Nick. "Mum's the word, mind you."

"Trust me."

Nick turned away with a nod and continued to furtively watch his man.

Staley arose a little later, after carefully scanning the paper, and with a look of grim satisfaction sauntered into the gentlemen's café and took a seat at one of the tables, hanging his overcoat and hat on a wall hook near by.

Nick saw him write a generous order, as if the news received had whetted his appetite. Sizing up the waiter at the same time, Nick decided that he had brains enough to serve his purpose, and he entered and took a seat at one of the near tables behind the broker, who had spread his newspaper again and was absorbed in its contents.

As Nick had foreseen, the same waiter presently came to take his order. While writing it on the tablet tendered him, Nick said quietly, with unmistakable significance:

"Do you want to earn ten dollars, my man?"

"Do I?" The waiter grinned expressively and bowed nearer. "Well, I should say, yes!"

"Can you keep your mouth closed? I am a detective, mind you, so you are taking no chances."

"I'm your candy kid, in that case."

"Listen. There's a letter in the inside breast pocket of the overcoat hanging behind the man you just served."

"At the second table?"

"Yes."

"I'm wise."

"I want to read it. Slip your hand into the pocket, while waiting on the man, and bring me the letter. It is only a card enclosed in an envelope. I will return it to you after looking at it, and you then can replace it."

"Do I get the ten now, or when?"

"The moment you have turned the trick successfully. Make sure that no one sees you."

"You leave that to me. It's as good as done."

The waiter proved, in fact, as good as his word.

Five minutes later Nick had read the words scribbled with a pencil on a plain visiting card, and also saw it safely returned to Staley's coat pocket.

The card contained only the following words, obviously an appointment:

"No. —— East Fifty-first Street, at nine to-night."

CHAPTER V.

AN ELUSIVE KNAVE.

Nick Carter gave the waiter no chance for treachery. He watched him until after Staley had finished his dinner and left the hotel, when the detective also departed—but no longer to shadow the broker.

Nick at once proceeded to Fifty-first Street to size up the house in which, he now felt reasonably sure, Staley was to meet one or more of the bond robbers.

It proved to be a stone house in a very desirable neighborhood, one of a four-story block, with a broad flight of steps leading up to the front door. In the darkness, however, for it then was nearly eight o'clock, Nick could discover no plate on the door, nor any sign of a light within. The curtains in the basement dining room and the parlor above it were closely drawn, and the dwelling appeared to be deserted.

"H'm, it looks dark enough for dark deeds," thought Nick, viewing the house from the shelter of an opposite doorway. "For all that, it's a pretty swell crib for the crooks to harbor in. If it were brightly lighted I should begin to fear I had called the turn wrong, and that Staley's rendezvous is on the level. Can it be that this job was the work of some unsuspected couple moving in good society? If not, why are they living there? It doesn't look like a boarding house, nor—h'm, I'll have a look at the back of it."

Making his way to the rear of the block, Nick found that the same conditions prevailed—drawn curtains, dark rooms, and, on the second floor, closed blinds.

In the gloom of the back yard, the fence of which he had cautiously scaled, Nick briefly weighed the circumstances and decided to stealthily enter the house.

"It don't look right," he grimly reasoned. "Such darkness is not consistent with an appointment here less than an hour hence. I'll be hanged if I don't have a look inside and see what it signifies. The owner may be away, designing to return before nine, and I shall take no great chance. I'll learn what comes off here, if Staley shows up, though it takes a leg."

Nick did not immediately enter the house, however. He returned to the street and found the policeman whose beat was in that locality, and to whom he re-

vealed his identity. The officer could tell him only that the owner of the house had been abroad with his wife for nearly a year, and that it had been rented furnished some three months before. He had never seen the tenant, however, and knew nothing about him, and only occasionally had seen the house lighted.

With suspicions augmented, Nick ordered the policeman to find another officer and stealthily watch both doors of the house, one in front, one at the rear, and to detain any person who left it after nine o'clock, unless given other instructions, but to interfere with no person entering it.

Assured that both officers would be at their stations within ten minutes, Nick returned to the yard back of the suspected residence.

Moving cautiously, working with skill and quietude that would have been the envy of a professional cracksman, he examined both of the basement windows, between the sashes of one of which he presently thrust the blade of his knife, and after a few moments succeeded in noiselessly unlocking it.

Raising it by slow degrees, he thrust his head into the room and listened.

The silence was unbroken.

The beam from his flash lamp shot through the darkness, revealing set tubs, a wooden bench, and a large wicker hamper.

"H'm, a basement laundry," thought Nick. "I must look further."

Quietly entering, he located the door of the room, found it open, stole into the basement entry and up a stairway leading into the main hall. Before he reached the top of it he made a discovery—that there was a bright light in one of the interior rooms.

It was shed through the open door and into the hall, yet not in sufficient volume to be seen from the street.

Pausing on the stairs, Nick listened intently.

Not a sound reached his ears. He stood motionless for several moments, scarce breathing.

"There should be somebody in the room, or why is it lighted?" he said to himself. "The inmate may be reading, or asleep, waiting for Staley to ring. I'll take a chance, at all events."

Taking advantage of the darkness in most of the hall, Nick crept up the stairs and approached the open door. When within a foot of it, he removed his hat and peered cautiously around the casing and into the brightly lighted room.

Nick Carter had met with many a surprise, but none greater than he experienced at that moment.

The room was the house library and handsomely furnished. It was lighted with an electric chandelier above a table in the middle of the room.

On one corner of the table stood a man's silk hat.

Near it was a russet leather bag of considerable size, closed and apparently locked, and evidently well filled. That it was the bag seen by Whitney in Genevieve Damon's apartments that morning, and that it still contained the fruits of the recent robbery, Nick had not a doubt.

What chiefly claimed his attention, however, was the solitary occupant of the room—a man standing with his back to a broad, empty fireplace, nearly opposite the door. He stood with his black frock coat thrown open, with both thumbs hooked through the armholes of his vest, with his lithe, aristocratic figure drawn erect, with a smile of mingled amusement and contempt on his white, clean-cut, classic face, and with his cold, steel-blue eyes turned directly upon the face of the detective, when he peered into the room.

For a moment, Nick Carter could have been knocked down with a feather, as the saying goes, so great was his astonishment.

For the man gazing at him with such supercilious composure was none other than the knave convicted of the jewel robbery and sent to Sing Sing two weeks before, and whom Nick would have felt it safe to swear was then within prison walls—Mr. Gaston Dupont.

The momentary silence was broken by a curiously cold and sinister laugh from Dupont, who was the first to speak.

"Well, well, what a pleasant surprise!" he exclaimed, without moving from his position. "Come in, Detective Carter! Come in and have a chair. Don't stand out there in the hall."

Still further surprised that he had been recognized, Nick stepped into the room and confronted the rascal, with only the broad library table between them.

"So you know me?" he said inquiringly, alert for the slightest threatening move by the other.

Dupont made none, however, but still stood with both thumbs hooked through his vest.

"Know you?" he cried lightly, with a laugh. "Why, my dear Carter, to be sure. What other detective could so quietly enter a house and steal to the room of its only inmate? Besides, my dear Carter, you have very penetrating eyes, that cannot be easily disguised, and, for reasons obvious to both of us, I shall not soon forget them."

"Only inmate, eh?" said Nick, ignoring the last mocking remark. "Is that so, Dupont?"

"Yes, indeed! I never lie—about trivial matters."

"I'm not so sure of it."

"Oh, you need have no fear, my dear Carter. I give you my word, that of a perfect gentleman, sir, that we are the only persons in the house. That is to say, of course, unless you have brought some of your very capable assistants."

"No, I came alone," Nick replied, with grim satisfaction. "You appear to have been waiting for me."

"Yes, indeed, but not long."

"How did it happen? Why did you expect me?"

"Oh, I did not expect you until a moment ago," Dupont replied, with an air of indifference. "I was sitting here in solitude, contemplating matters pertaining only to my own affairs. Suddenly, I thought I felt a draught of night air. After a moment, I became sure of it, and thought it came from the basement. I reasoned, of course, that a door, or window, had been quietly opened, presumably either by a crook or a detective. Crooks always visit me openly, my dear Carter, and I at once decided that the intruder must be a detective, in all probability yourself. Really, I am delighted to see you."

Piqued a little by the audacity of the rascal, Nick quelled his surprise and met the situation as he found it. Removing his disguise, he thrust it into his pocket, replying sternly, at the same time drawing his revolver.

"Delighted, are you? That cuts no ice with me, Dupont. Your face gives your words the lie. Have you a weapon in your pocket?"

Dupont laughed and nodded.

"One," he replied. "A revolver."

"Take it out, holding it by the barrel, and lay it on the table. Don't point it this way, or you'll be a dead man before you can wink an eyelid."

"Dear me, Carter, how very severe you are," Dupont rejoined, with a deprecatory smile. "Why can't you meet me half way, in gentlemanly fashion? I haven't the slightest wish to harm you."

"I'll take good care you don't," Nick put in bluntly. "Don't hand me any more of that mush, either. There's nothing in it for you."

"There, my dear Carter, is the weapon. Slip it into your own pocket, that you may feel perfectly safe while with me. It strikes me very oddly, on the level, that a detective of your calibre should stand in fear of a man of my peaceful disposition. I'm really quite surprised."

Dupont laid his revolver on the table while speaking, then resumed his former attitude near the broad fireplace, with his back touching the finely carved mantel and his thumbs thrust into his vest pockets.

Nick disposed of the weapon as suggested, then closed and locked the door leading into the hall, putting the key into his pocket.

The only other door was one leading into the front parlor. It was partly open. Nick stepped to the threshold and glanced into the room. By the light shed into it from the library, he saw that the parlor was unoccupied, and he closed and locked the door. He left the key in the lock, however, his intention being to personally admit Staley and arrest him, or any other visitor who might ring the bell.

Gaston Dupont watched him without moving, but with a covert leer lurking in his eyes.

"Long experience with such slippery fellows as you, Dupont, has taught me a thing or two," Nick said sternly, reverting to him. "You'll be given no opportunity for trickery. Your statements have no weight with me, and I propose to sift this affair to the bottom."

"Yes, yes, of course," Dupont cried quickly, bowing and smiling. "I expected no less, my dear Carter, when I realized you were here. I shall be charmed to assist you, and give you any information I possess."

"Sit down, then, and do so," Nick commanded, pointing to a chair. "How came you out of Sing Sing?"

"Sing Sing—it's a horrid place," Dupont said, with a shrug and grimace, while he took the chair indicated. "It was a very scurvy trick on your part, Carter, to send me to such a place. Really, you could not expect me to remain there, a man of my cloth."

"Humph! Your cloth, indeed," Nick growled, from a chair directly opposite the smiling scamp. "How did you escape?"

"Escape?" Dupont echoed, with brows lifted. "You use the wrong word, my dear Carter."

"Wrong word?"

"I did not escape. I was liberated."

"Liberated by whom?"

"I supposed you knew all about it. Haven't you read the evening papers?"

"No."

"You will find it in all of them," Dupont unctuously asserted; "a rehearsal of that unfortunate jewel robbery, together with a history of my life, the curious circumstances that led to my being suspected of that

crime, and a brief reference to the influences brought to bear for my speedy liberation. Really, Carter, the papers do not speak well of your work on that case. They assert that you must have been very blind, and one editorial condemns you openly. I'm sorry I haven't an evening paper here, that I might read you the article. I was liberated yesterday by order of the governor of the State."

"Dupont, you're lying," Nick said sharply.

"Ah! I thought you might say so."

"I know that you are."

"Why don't you verify my assertions? You can easily do so."

"In what way?"

"Step out and get an evening paper," Dupont suggested with a sly smile. "It will tell you the whole story."

"When I leave this house, Dupont, you will leave it with me," Nick sternly retorted, ignoring the rascal's insinuating levity. "Make no mistake about that."

"I am not more likely to be mistaken, my dear Carter, than yourself."

"Possibly not."

"As a matter of fact, however, I expect you will be foolish enough to arrest me again. How can you be so blind? You detectives put men of my cloth to no end of trouble."

"I'm not so blind as you think," Nick snapped back at him. "Don't imagine that I swallow anything that you are saying. You're not the sort of man who takes a needless chance of arrest. If you had known I was in this house, you would have quickly tried to escape. Very likely you did so, moreover, only to discover that I have an officer watching each door, with orders to arrest any person who comes out."

"Ah, indeed!" Dupont quickly exclaimed, with a subtle fire showing in his eyes for an instant. "I am very glad you told me about them."

"Little good that will do you," Nick retorted. "You were not sure any intruder was in the house, for you stood listening when I appeared at the door. You pulled yourself together quickly, I'll give you credit for that, and received me in this fashion only for a bluff, taking a chance that I may be following only a blind trail. Get that idea out of your head, Dupont, and speak the truth, if you can."

"Certainly, Carter, if you insist," Dupont bowed, still smirking slyly. "I have so many ideas in my head, in fact, that I can easily dispense with so unimportant a one."

"What are you doing in this house, anyway?"

"I have a perfect right to be here."

"You have, eh?"

"Certainly. I rented it some three months ago, though I then was quartered in a fashionable hotel."

"Yes, I remember," Nick growled curtly. "Why did you rent the house?"

"I'll explain," said Dupont, with a subtle ring stealing into his voice, adding weight to his words. "Don't you remember, my dear Carter, when you and I were discussing the relative abilities of crooks and detectives, that I told you a master crook was always superior to the most astute detective? And I then informed you, Carter, a master crook would live in a hundred characters and have as many aliases. When menaced in one, he would flee to another, or create anew. He would have, too, numerous secret retreats to which he could repair, in case of need, and——"

"And this house is one of yours, eh?" Nick bluntly interrupted.

"You are at liberty to infer so, if that is your inclination," said Dupont, with unruffled suavity.

"Then, take this from me," Nick sharply retorted. "You now are well trapped in your so-called secret retreat. You will leave it only in irons, take my word for that."

"I wouldn't think of doubting you, my dear Carter."

"Now, Dupont, what is in this bag?"

No longer inclined to listen to the mocking blandishments of the rascal, Nick reached across the table and seized the leather bag, drawing it toward him and finding it locked.

Dupont regarded him without a change of countenance.

"Really, my dear Carter, I haven't the slightest idea," he coolly asserted.

"You don't know what it contains?"

"I do not."

"How came it here?"

"I brought it here this afternoon, at the request of a lady friend whom I relieved of it on the street, and who promised to call here for it this evening."

"Who is the lady?"

"Her name is Damon—Genevieve Damon," smiled Dupont. "She is an old and dear friend, very handsome, I assure you, and very charming. I hope, my dear Carter, that you will defer our departure, and surely defer humiliating me with manacles, until after she has called and departed. I would gladly introduce you. I know you would like to meet her."

"Yes, very much," Nick allowed, with sinister dry-

ness. "There's a deal more truth than poetry in that. Do you expect any other equally dear friends whom I should enjoy meeting?"

"No; no friend of mine, not even an acquaintance," said Dupont, as affably as ever. "Some friend of Miss Damon, however, is to join her here at nine and accompany her to the railway station. At her request, too, when I relieved her of the satchel, I left a card for him at the Hotel Belmont. Miss Damon will leave for Washington on the late express."

"No, she won't, Dupont, if she calls here."

"No?"

"Instead," Nick said bluntly, "she will leave for the Tombs, together with you and her friend, if he also shows up."

"Really, Carter, you surprise me," Dupont returned with a shrug. "What is the occasion for such a step?"

"Have you a key to this bag?" Nick sharply demanded, ignoring his question.

"No. If I had, I might have been tempted to see what the bag contains."

"You already know."

"Nonsense! I haven't the slightest idea."

"I'll very soon show you, then," Nick declared, taking out a ring of small skeleton keys. "I'll open it for you in two shakes of a lamb's tail."

"Stop a bit!" Dupont exclaimed, leaning forward in his chair. "Really, my dear Carter, it's not good form for you to open property belonging to one of my friends and confided to my keeping. Think in what an embarrassing position you will place me, if she should arrive before the bag can be relocked. My watch says nine, already, and she—ah, there's the doorbell, now! It must be Miss Damon herself, who surely will inform you what is in the bag and dispel your absurd suspicions, of whatever they may consist. Shall I answer it, my dear Carter? Shall I answer the bell?"

"No!"

Nick sprang up with a threatening fire in his eyes, and thrust the juggling knave back in his chair.

"You sit there," he commanded; "and sit quiet, too, or your life may be the forfeit. I'll answer the bell myself."

"Certainly, certainly, Carter; don't be so severe. I comply most cheerfully—I do, indeed!"

Nick had replaced the leather bag on the table, and was about to start for the front door. Instead, turning abruptly around, he produced a pair of handcuffs, and quickly snapped them around Dupont's wrists.

"When dealing with such slippery knaves as you, Dupont, I take no chance of trickery," he growled harshly. "If you move from that chair before I return, I'll break every bone in your body."

Though he heard Dupont mutter a word of protest, then laugh under his breath, Nick did not wait for an answer.

He heard the bell ring again, as if the visitor waiting on the front steps was becoming impatient.

Unlocking only the door between the two rooms, Nick quickly crossed the parlor and glanced from the window.

There was nobody on the steps—no person in sight, even.

Instantly suspecting trickery of some kind, Nick darted back to the library, from which he had been absent hardly ten seconds.

The light still burned brightly.

The door leading into the hall still was closed and locked.

That between the two rooms, the only visible avenue of escape, could not possibly have been used without detection.

Nevertheless, Gaston Dupont and the leather bag—had vanished.

CHAPTER VI.

THE TRICK FIREPLACE.

Though he knew Dupont to be an elusive knave, Nick Carter was staggered for an instant by his lightning-like disappearance.

All that remained of the rascal was his glistening silk hat.

That no longer was on the table, but was lying on its side on the floor near the slippery trickster's chair.

Nick halted for a moment, staring, then quickly locked the door between the two rooms.

Darting to the other, he found that it still was locked. He knew that no mortal man, in handcuffs and in less than ten seconds, could have unlocked it and left the room, relocking it after him.

There was no closet, no visible concealment, no sign of an opening in any of the walls, nor in the ceiling. There was no break in the heavy Wilton carpet that entirely covered the floor.

Nick Carter was mystified, as well as bitterly disgusted, but he did not believe in the supernatural.

"Hang the slippery eel, he cannot have gone through the floor," he muttered, glancing at the silk hat, and then back of each chair and under the table.

As he crouched to peer beneath it, placing his hand on the carpet near one of the legs, Nick felt a small round knob under the carpet, evidently protruding a trifle from the floor. It was within easy reach of the chair in which Dupont had been sitting. At the same moment, while his hand was pressing it, Nick heard the ringing of a bell, the same that he had heard before.

"By thunder! That's not the doorbell," he muttered, repeatedly pressing the knob and noting the intermittent ringing. "This once has been used for a dining room, and the bell is a servant's call, operated by means of a button under the table and carpet. This tricky Dupont rang it with his foot, when he found that I was going to open the bag, knowing it would send me out of the room and give him a chance to give me the slip. He dropped his hat in his haste, and did not dare delay to pick it up. But, hang it, what way can he have taken? H'm, that might be!"

It suddenly occurred to Nick that Dupont might have escaped through the broad fireplace, and that his hat might have been knocked from his head when he stooped under the mantel.

Crouching on the huge stone slab forming the hearth, Nick found it perfectly clean, without a sign of soot or ashes, and an upward glance convinced him that the chimney was much too small to admit the body of a man.

Feeling sure that he was on the right track, however, for no other way of escape appeared possible, Nick threw the beam of his flashlight upon the inner wall of the fireplace and began a closer examination of it, as well as of the hearthstone.

Presently, he made a discovery—a small iron rod about six inches in length protruded from one wall of the chimney, more than three feet above the hearthstone, and entirely out of view from the room, and nearly out of reach.

By kneeling on the hearthstone, however, which brought him fairly into the fireplace and directly under the chimney, Nick could easily reach the rod, at which he tugged violently to see if it was secure.

"Holy smoke!" he muttered, startled by what followed.

A quick, metallic click fell on his ears, as if a ratchet had been released and a machine of some kind set in operation.

The broad stone slab on which he was kneeling, or a large, circular portion of it, began to revolve. The back wall of the fireplace moved with it, as if the centre of motion was directly under the middle of it. The whole hearthstone was moving around, bearing the detective on it, as a turntable moves in a locomotive roundhouse.

It was turning Nick out of the library from which Gaston Dupont had escaped, and into a corresponding room in—the next house!

Though he quickly suspected the truth, that the device was a secretly constructed invention of this master crook, designed for no less a purpose than that just exemplified, Nick narrowly escaped being caught in the moving section of the wall. Only by crouching quickly and ducking his head did he avoid it, and then hurriedly scrambled out of a fireplace precisely like that which he had entered in the adjoining house. It was plain enough, now, why Dupont's silk hat had been left lying on the floor.

The room in which Nick found himself was not a library, however. It was furnished for a bedroom, obviously that of a woman, and an open door led into a front parlor. Both were lighted, but evidently had been hurriedly deserted, and Nick did not delay for any immediate investigations.

He rushed through the front room and out of the house, meeting, nearly at the foot of the steps, the policeman he had stationed outside.

"Has anybody left this house, Grady?" Nick hurriedly asked.

"Yes, sir, a man and woman," was the quick reply.

"How long ago?"

"Faith, only five minutes. I saw them from across the street, and sauntered to the corner after them. They hailed a cab and went up the avenue."

"Did they have any luggage?"

"The man had a leather bag. He carried it in front of him with both hands, so fashion."

"For a very good reason," Nick growled, now convinced that Dupont had escaped him. "He was in irons and could not part his hands. Did he have a hat on?"

"Sure, he did; a soft felt hat," Grady quickly nodded. "I saw them come out, and thought they were all right. This is not the house you told me to watch. 'Twas the next one."

Nick did not stop to explain.

"That's true, Grady," he replied hurriedly. "Watch both of them, now, from an opposite doorway. Don't leave until I come out, and arrest any person who attempts to enter either of them."

Nick did not wait for an answer, but returned to the house, the door of which he had left open. An elderly, gray-haired woman then was in the hall, look-

ing much amazed and apprehensive, and Nick quickly made himself known and began to question her.

The woman stated that she was a widow, Mrs. Jessup, and that she owned the house. Having only a moderate income, however, she had rented the two rooms in question, about three months ago, to a woman named Page, who had come well recommended and paid her very liberally. She protested that she knew nothing more definite about the lodger, whose habits appeared to be good and who was very reserved. She had been away for nearly a week, Mrs. Jessup stated, returning only that afternoon.

Quick to read character, Nick decided that the woman was telling the truth, that she had been duped by the same female crook who had figured in the bond robbery, and that she knew nothing about the trick device in the fireplace, which must have been constructed from the adjoining house and at times when she was absent. This was confirmed in a measure by Mrs. Jessup's avowal that the lodger took entire charge of her rooms, and would allow no one in them.

Nick saw there was very little to be learned from Mrs. Jessup, and he delayed only to give her his instructions.

"If this Page woman returns, you must at once notify the police by telephone, if you have one," he commanded.

"I have none, Mr. Carter."

"Find a way to secretly do so, then," said Nick. "I shall have the house watched, but she might come in disguise, possibly in male attire, in which case you must follow my instructions."

"I will, certainly."

"It is hardly probable that she will venture to come here again. If she has left any considerable wardrobe, however, she may take a desperate chance to recover it. If she sends a messenger for it, or writes you to forward it to any address, you must at once notify me. Here is my card."

"Yes, sir; thank you."

"I am going to lock the doors of both rooms and retain the keys," Nick added. "They must not be entered until after I have made a thorough investigation, which I will do to-morrow. I now am going in there, and will pass out through the adjoining house when I depart. I will put out the lights when I go."

"Very well, sir. I hope, Mr. Carter, that you do not suspect me of having known anything about this woman, or that I am guilty of any wrongdoing."

Nick quickly shook his head.

"I do not, Mrs. Jessup," he said frankly. "Quite the contrary, in fact. I think the woman has made you her dupe, only, as she probably has duped a good many others. You need have no fears concerning yourself."

"Thank you, sir. I am glad to hear you say so."

Nick bowed and smiled, then entered the front room and locked the door, removing the key and putting it in his pocket.

A brief examination in both rooms convinced Nick of several facts. The wardrobe left by the Page woman, or Genevieve Damon, was not extensive and of no great value. There was absolutely nothing that gave him a clue to her true identity. That she was a professional crook, that she had made this house a temporary refuge, that she was an old confederate of Dupont, and that the adjoining house had been rented and the secret passage between them constructed in order that meetings might be held and knavery safely planned, probably with numerous other confederates—these facts were obvious enough to the detective.

Nick now saw plainly, too, how the bond robbery had been committed, and who were involved in it. It was obvious that Staley had paved the way to it by getting Whitney to buy the bonds, which, after the robbery, had been taken in charge by Dupont, who had brought them to the rented house, where Staley evidently was to have joined him that evening for a division of the plunder.

Staley did not put in an appearance, however, though Grady watched outside for him until after midnight. Nick afterward learned that the rascal had seen him hurry out of the house and talk with the officer, and that he at once had suspected the truth and taken to his heels.

It here may be noted, too, that the bucket shop was not opened the following day. Neither Staley nor Wade could be located, and an investigation of their affairs, ordered by the court, showed that the concern was hopelessly bankrupt, and embezzlers of large sums entrusted to them by their customers.

Before leaving the house that night, Nick made a closer inspection of the trick fireplace, and satisfied himself as to how it was constructed. The fact that the same chimney served both houses had made the device feasible, and, with the ingenuity of a master mechanic, as well as a master crook, Dupont had taken advantage of it.

Subsequent examination showed that the hearthstone had been set upon numerous small wheels, governed by an ingenious mechanism under the floor, and operated by a current taken from the electric light

wires. The movable section of wall between the two fireplaces, so closely fitted that it defied ordinary inspection, turned completely around with the revolving stone, and formed a comparatively easy way of passing from one house to the other.

It was eleven o'clock when Nick Carter departed that night, not a little disgusted by the crafty escape of Dupont. At ten o'clock the following morning, however, he was seated in his business office in company with his three assistants, Chick, Patsy, and Bob Ferret, whom he had informed of all that occurred the previous night.

Chick, in turn, reported that Wade had done nothing inviting suspicion the afternoon before, but had gone to his lodgings and remained there after leaving his place of business.

The same was true, in effect, of both of the clerks employed by Whitney & Blair, and Nick was convinced that neither was concerned in the crime, and that it no longer would be necessary to watch them.

Just what to do, in fact, to again discover the trail of the crafty Dupont, was a perplexing question. It had been under discussion for more than an hour when Patsy, who was opening the morning mail, startled all hands by suddenly exclaiming:

"Holy smoke! Great guns, what a nerve!"

"What's that, Patsy?" Nick quickly asked, turning toward him.

"A letter for you, sir," cried Patsy, looking up from the written sheet.

"A letter from whom?"

"From Gaston Dupont."

CHAPTER VII.

MORE ABOUT DUPONT.

"From Gaston Dupont!"

Nick echoed Patsy's assertion, with a frown, then reached for the letter.

"Let me see it," he commanded.

He read it with brows knit, then smiled contemptuously, a bit ominously, and proceeded to read it aloud.

It was written with a pen, apparently by the audacious scamp himself, as if he had no fear that his writing would ever lead to his downfall. It ran as follows:

"My Dear Carter: I am returning your handcuffs by express. I send them with as little delay as possible, thinking you may need them for some ordinary crook with whom you are able to cope successfully. What an inferior fellow he would be, to be sure!

"Really, my dear Carter, you are amusing. Your puerile efforts would appear farcical, if it were not for the obvious seriousness with which they are made. Why don't you take a systematic course of instruction from some capable teacher? If our relations were not so strained, I should be delighted to serve you in that capacity. There is so much that I could tell you, so many fine points that I could elucidate. I think you could grasp them; I do, indeed!

"They would serve to broaden you out and greatly improve your inferior methods. Frankly, my dear Carter, I am tempted to ask for a truce to your hostility, that I may do this for you and so develop you that you may become of interest to me, instead of a mere annoyance.

"Thus far, my dear Carter, you have succeeded only in putting me to trouble, in making yourself a bore. You are like a strange dog sniffing at one's heels. If you continue, unless you can make yourself of genuine interest to me, I must take steps to muzzle you, if nothing more. Even a mongrel may, you know, inflict a painful bite. Don't compel me to go to such an extreme. I hope the handcuffs will be delivered promptly. Really, I felt tempted to bring them in person. I did, however, prepay the express charges.

"Thanking you for your voluntary call of last evening, and regretting that another engagement precluded my entertaining you longer, believe me, my dear Carter, sincerely wishing you every success, particularly in your profession,

"Your very good friend,

"Gaston Dupont."

"P. S.—I will send you my permanent address as soon as I am comfortably settled in new quarters."

Nick read this taunting letter aloud, then tossed it upon his desk.

"Permanent address, eh?" he cried, with a growl. "That soon shall be Sing Sing again, take my word for it, and I'll make it a point to see that his comforts are properly looked after."

"He certainly has a crust," Chick declared, laughing.

"Crust!" echoed Patsy. "Gee! That's no name for it."

"There's one thing I can't fathom," Bob Ferret put in perplexedly.

"What is that?" Nick inquired, not inclined to do more than ignore the letter.

"How he got out of Sing Sing."

"The rascal told me last night that he was pardoned by the governor of the State," Nick replied. "Also that the evening papers contain a full account of the Whitney jewel robbery for which he was convicted, together with a history of his life. All that was a lie, of course, and there is only one explanation of his being at large. He must have contrived to escape."

"I should think we'd have heard of it," said Chick.

"Call up the Central Office, Patsy. I'll find out whether the chief knows anything about it."

Patsy started to obey, only to be deterred by the ringing of the doorbell. Curiously enough, an old adage was exemplified; for the visitor, when ushered in by Nick's servant, proved to be none other than a Central Office detective, Dan Foley, who had figured to some extent in the investigation of the jewel robbery mentioned.

"Howdy, Nick?" he vouchsafed, by way of greeting "Hello, boys."

It brought a nod from each, while Nick received him pleasantly, and waved the burly plain-clothes man to a chair.

"Good morning, Dan," he replied. "You're quite a stranger."

"Summut."

"What do you say?"

"The chief sent me round to see you."

"See me, eh? Something doing?"

"Well, yes, such as it is," Foley nodded, looking a bit sheepish. "We've been banging at it on the quiet for five days, and haven't got anywhere. He said we'd better get you to lend us a hand, you knowing the slippery cuss better than we do."

Nick's eyes took on a curious squint, while a move with merely his forefinger prevented disclosures by either of his assistants, all of whom now anticipated what was coming.

"To whom do you refer, Dan?" Nick suavely inquired.

"That fly chap you sent up two weeks ago."

"What name? I've done that for a good many."

"Dupont."

"Ah! I remember," smiled Nick. "Gaston Dupont, eh? What about him?"

"He's out again."

"Out of Sing Sing?"

"That's what. Gave the screws up there the slip five days ago. He——"

"Five days!" Nick exclaimed, interrupting. "I've heard nothing about it, nor seen any reference to it in the newspapers. What's the meaning of that?"

"Well, we thought best to hush it up for a few days, while we tried to run the reptile down," Foley grimly explained. "It doesn't sound too good, you know, when such fellows worm out of limbo. We hoped to run him to cover, but he's fooled us all right, and the chief sent me round to make you wise, thinking you might lend us a hand."

"H'm, I see," Nick murmured, still squinting oddly.

"We're not so beastly lame, at that," Foley quickly added; "for we've got a good bit of his record and know he made a fool of Scotland Yard for better than five years. He escaped from custody over there no less than seven times, twice out of prison. An eel isn't in it with this fly covey."

"Who gave you this information?" Nick asked, with greater interest.

"Sergeant Horner, the Scotland Yarder. He's over here on a still hunt, and dropped into Mulberry Street yesterday morning. He heard us discussing Dupont's escape, and he tumbled to the rascal's identity right off the reel."

"What did he tell you about him?"

"Enough to convince us that he's the real goods," Foley growled significantly. "His name is Dupont, all right. Horner wondered at his using it so boldly. He worked London for several years under the name of Malherb, and quit England only because he saw greater opportunities on this side. Horner got that straight frim one of his pals."

"Did he state any facts about the man himself?"

"Sure thing. I'll give you all I can remember."

"Do so, Foley."

"His father was a French chemist, his mother a Servian woman. She was high bred, but a bad egg, and died in Paris ten years ago. Dupont got his bad streak from her, it's said. He was given a fine education, all the same, and was graduated from two French institutes. He is an expert chemist, got it from his father, and knows all about drugs and medicines. What he doesn't know, as far as that goes, Horner says, wouldn't fill a big book."

"Anything more?"

"Only that he took to knavery like a duck takes to water. He lived in style in London for three years before he was suspected, and was in touch with the worst crooks in the city. He kept no less than five houses, in which he had trusty confederates established, apparently living honest and reputable lives.

An album, containing no less than fifty of his aliases, with notes relating to them and the disguise of each, was found in a house from which he was compelled to bolt hurriedly. He had so many he couldn't remember them."

"I don't wonder," Nick allowed, smiling faintly. "Anything more?"

"He had a woman confederate when in London, who was said to be nearly as clever as himself," Foley said in conclusion. "She was very handsome, dark as an Italian, and very accomplished. Her name was said to be Estelle Venner. It's not known what has become of her, Horner says. Dupont kept half a score of paid spies to watch the police, moreover, and it was through one of them that he narrowly escaped arrest just before he left England. One thing is sure, he made monkeys of the London police. It's no sure thing that he won't do as much for us. Horner says there's no limit to the rascal's craft, nerve, and resources."

"Horner may be right," Nick said indifferently. "But what about Dupont's escape from Sing Sing?"

"That was due to Tim Callahan, one of the deputies."

"How due to him?"

"Well, we have only his story," Foley growled. "He had occasion to go to Dupont's cell for something last Tuesday morning. He was found there, half an hour later, unconscious and as stiff as a stick, and dressed in Dupont's prison togs. There was a hypodermic syringe on the floor near him, or what was left of one, for the cylinder had been crushed to atoms, possibly to prevent anybody from learning what it had contained. Dupont hasn't been seen since."

"Well, well, is that so?" queried Nick, with droll intonation.

"So is right," Foley nodded. "The rascal coolly walked out of prison in Callahan's clothes. He must have had a red wig and beard resembling Callahan's, for he passed two of the officers, neither of whom detected anything wrong. It's not known where he got the stuff. He has had no visitors since he went up. He played a like trick in London, Horner says."

"What Callahan says is of much greater significance," Nick dryly remarked.

"That's what the warden thinks, I reckon," said Foley. "Callahan claims that Dupont run the syringe into him as he was turning to leave the cell, and that it must have contained some very powerful drug, for he went dopey on the instant and couldn't utter a sound. The next he knew, or so he claims, was when he came to on a cot in the prison hospital."

"That sounds a bit fishy to me," said Nick. "Has he recovered?"

"Yes, sure. But he is under arrest, pending further investigations and the result of our efforts to corral Dupont. We haven't been able to find the slightest trace of him, and that's why the chief decided to make you wise. What do you say? Got any idea?"

"No, Dan; none worth putting into words," Nick replied, with a vacant stare at his listening assistants. "I shall have to think it over."

"Will you do so?"

"Yes."

"And see the chief?"

"Certainly."

"When?"

"When I have anything worth telling," Nick said, smiling. "I think he may expect me within a day or two. Very possibly, Foley, I'll bring Dupont with me."

"Yes, you will," Foley laughed derisively, staring. "What's that you are handing me? Do you expect to accomplish in a day or two what the whole Central Office push has been muckling at for nearly a week?"

"Stranger things have happened, Dan," Nick rejoined oddly.

"Not in mine," Foley declared, rising to go. "I'm from Missouri; you'll have to show me!"

CHAPTER VIII.

A DOUBLE GAME.

It was on Saturday that the Central Office man called on Nick Carter, soliciting his aid to effect the capture of Gaston Dupont. Though he had given Foley a hint that something might be expected within a day or two, possibly no less than the apprehension of the crook, Nick had confided his views and designs only to his assistants.

Much to the surprise of many readers, however, Foley included, all of the newspapers of Sunday published sensational stories of Dupont's remarkable escape, with accounts of his evil career, and all wound up with statements that Callahan, the Sing Sing officer, though at first suspected of having been Dupont's confederate and placed under arrest, would be released the following day for lack of absolute evidence

against him, and that he would no longer be retained in the service.

As may be inferred, Nick Carter was responsible for the publication of these stories. That one of them, at least, would be read by Gaston Dupont, Nick had not a doubt.

Callahan was not released until Monday afternoon, however, and he at once repaired to the station and boarded a train for New York. He was a man of medium size and nearly fifty, with a florid face, red hair and beard, and a look of sinister dissatisfaction. He took a seat in the smoking car and lit a cigar.

Another man, who looked very much as if he had come out of Sing Sing, boarded the same train and entered the same car. He was clad in a seedy brown suit, a dark-featured, rather hangdog-looking fellow, whose uninviting aspect was augmented by a stubby beard of several days' growth. Though he entered the same car, he took a seat well back of the discharged officer, and made it a point that Callahan should not observe him.

The last was a significant fact, for the hangdog-looking fellow was—Nick Carter.

Not only suspecting that Callahan had been bribed to let Dupont escape, as well as to provide him with the necessary means, as others had quickly suspected, Nick also had seen how advantage might be taken of the relations existing between this treacherous officer and the crook, and he shaped his course accordingly.

Nick felt sure, in fact, that Dupont could not possibly have settled with Callahan for this treachery, having no means with which to have done so while in prison. He reasoned that Callahan would, therefore, immediately after his release, hasten to some rendezvous agreed upon with the prisoner, in order to be promptly paid for the services he had rendered.

Relying upon this possibility, Nick had secretly arranged with the prison warden for the release of Callahan, and then published newspaper stories in order to inform Dupont of the fact. From the moment the former left the prison, the detective was on his track.

It was early evening when Callahan arrived in New York, and, apparently, he had no fear of being shadowed. He first went to a barber's shop, where he had his hair and whiskers trimmed, and then had lunch in a near saloon. Half an hour later, or about nine o'clock, he entered a notorious concert hall on the East Side, where he took a seat at one of the tables.

Nick followed him into the place, taking a chair at another table, and sat furtively watching him.

Neither attracted any attention, for the place was nearly filled with a class common in that locality; and the clatter of tongues, sounds of laughter and the clink of glasses, mingled with the music of a German orchestra on a platform at one end of the long room.

Callahan had been seated only a very few minutes when a waitress, all of whom were young women, approached to take his order.

Nick felt a thrill of grim satisfaction when he caught a good look at her. He saw at once that her hair and brows were dyed a light brown hue, for they did not correspond with her very dark eyes. Her regular features, her noticeable beauty, her lithe yet finely developed figure—these combined to convince him that she was the very woman who had figured in the bond robbery, Dupont's confederate, the Page woman, Genevieve Damon, and the jade who had been known in London as Estelle Venner.

"Well, this looks like business, for fair," he said to himself. "She has been sent here to meet Callahan, and is posing as a waitress in order to avert suspicion, in case he is shadowed. It's a hundred to one that the girl paid for the privilege of working here to-night. The scamp who runs the place can be bought for a song. It's a safe bet that her design is to conduct Callahan to some place where he can meet Dupont."

Nick ordered a drink of another waitress and continued to watch the couple. After a few minutes he contrived to catch the eye of the woman, who was talking quietly with Callahan, after filling his order. Nick winked significantly and signed for her to come over and join him.

Estelle, which Nick felt pretty sure was her true name, regarded him doubtfully for a moment, then nodded that she would presently comply.

She continued talking with Callahan for several minutes, however, then brought him a second drink, which she left him to dispose of while she was at Nick's table.

"What'll you have?" she asked, halting and looking down at him.

Nick met her searching scrutiny with a smile, with a suggestive glint in his expressive eyes.

"I've got something to say to you," he replied.

"To me?"

"Yes."

"What about?"

"A barrel of money."

"Not for mine, mister," Estelle replied, laughing. "There's nothing like that coming my way."

"I'll give it to you straight," Nick insisted. "Wouldn't you like to make a good haul?"

"If easily made, sure."

"It will be that, all right."

"What do you mean?" Estelle demanded, bending nearer as if inclined to consider his project.

Nick detected in her dark eyes, however, a gleam convincing him that she already knew what he meant. He did not deviate from his purpose, nevertheless, but said quietly:

"Do you know the fellow you've been talking with?"

"No," said Estelle. "Do you?"

"Yes. He was an officer in Sing Sing, and was discharged to-day."

"What of it?" Estelle came back at him. "He has nothing on me."

"I don't mean that," Nick hastened to explain. "You are all right, but he's not."

"How do you know?"

"I'm a detective. My name is Nick Carter."

"Get out! Is that on the level?"

"True as gospel," Nick earnestly nodded. "I'll tell you what I want and how you can serve me, if you have nerve."

"I have nerve enough," Estelle vouchsafed, with a sinister squint. "What sort of a game are you putting up to me?"

"It's a very simple one, and you shall be well paid if you take a hand in it. Your part, moreover, will not be difficult."

"What part is that?"

"I think that fellow is going somewhere to join a crook whom I want to arrest," Nick explained. "It may be to a private house, where the crook may have some secret way of escape, by which he would elude me even if I raided the place. I want to get into the house quietly and nail him before he can jump. You can help me."

"How?"

"I've been watching the man while you were talking with him. He would be an easy mark for a girl as handsome as you. I see that plain enough."

"Nonsense!" Estelle proceeded, laughing. "Quit your kidding."

"I'm not kidding," Nick insisted. "If you were to suggest going with him, it's a hundred to one that he would be glad to take you along. In that way, you might get into the house without alarming any of the inmates. A little later you could find a way to stealthily open a door, or a window, and let me in. That's all I should want."

"You think 'tis, eh?" Estelle questioned dryly.

"Sure thing. I can do the rest."

"You might not be able to handle the crook alone," Estelle said pointedly. "Hadn't you better get some help?"

"You don't know me," Nick as pointedly answered. "I don't need any help. I can do the job alone, providing I can get my hands on the slippery rascal. After I land him, mind you, you shall receive a thousand dollars for assisting me."

"Say!" Estelle drawled, with affected eagerness, "That don't go, does it?"

"As sure as you make good and I turn the trick."

"I'd take long chances for that much money."

"You will be in no danger," Nick assured her. "All you need do is get into the house, make sure the crook is there, and then contrive to let me in. After that, you can slip away as soon as you please."

"What's the crook's name?"

"Dupont. You probably will hear it mentioned."

"In case I don't," suggested Estelle, with a covert leer, "you had better describe him."

Nick did so briefly, the woman listening attentively.

"Well, what do you say?" Nick asked in conclusion. "Will you undertake it?"

Estelle pretended to consider the matter for a moment, then nodded and shrugged her shoulders.

"Yes, I'll take the chance," she replied decidedly. "You remain here, mind you, and keep an eye on me. If you go out before I leave with the man, in case he thinks well of it, I'll throw up the whole business. After we leave, you stick as close to me as a shadow."

"Trust me for that," Nick dryly assured her. "I'll remain here until you go, and will be at your heels from the moment you leave."

"That's good enough for me. Get next, then, if you see anything doing."

CHAPTER IX.

CLOSING IN.

Nick Carter was not moving blindly, as one not versed in the detective art might suppose. He had suspected that Callahan would keep an appointment agreed upon with Dupont, or that he might meet a go-between who would conduct him to the latter.

That the go-between would be the woman in the case, however, Nick had not anticipated, yet he had no hesitation in seizing the bull by the horns. He knew that he had a woman of remarkable craft and cunning to deal with, by whom his identity and de-

signs were suspected before he disclosed them to her, and he had shaped the only course that gave promise of serving his purpose.

Nick knew, too, that the woman would force Callahan to follow her instructions; also that, in pursuing the couple, he should be led into the very midst of the gang he was aiming to locate.

Nick was prepared for nothing less.

Returning to Callahan, Estelle talked earnestly with him for several minutes, with smiles and an air designed to blind Nick to the true nature of their discussion.

Presently leaving him, she entered a room at one side of the concert hall, only to return in her street garments very quickly. She glanced significantly at Nick, nodding slightly, and then left the place in company with Callahan.

Nick at once arose and followed them.

No conveyance was taken. Walking rapidly to Second Avenue, with frequent backward glances to make sure the detective was near by, Estelle proceeded north several blocks and then turned east through a street in one of the unsavory precincts.

Five more minutes brought the couple to an uninviting dwelling nearly over to the river front, a house flanked on one side by a low, wooden block of tenement houses, and on the other by the bare brick wall of a brewery, from which it was divided by a narrow court leading to the rear of the huge distillery.

The street was by no means deserted, for the numerous saloons were open and groups of men were gathered in the doorways, or talking on the curbings, with a scattering of ill-clad women and girls among them.

Nick was hardly ten feet behind the couple when Callahan, directed by the woman, halted abruptly in front of the house and remarked, loud enough for the detective to hear:

"This is the place. I've got a key."

It had been given to him by Estelle.

She glanced expressively at Nick as he sauntered by them, signifying with a covert gesture that he must wait on the curbing. Obviously, she was convinced that he had made no attempt to procure assistance, and Nick knew that she would watch him from the moment she entered the house.

He saw her follow Callahan up the narrow wooden steps, and, before the door had fairly closed upon them, he turned back and took a position directly in front of the house, where he stood, whistling indifferently.

Not a light was to be seen in the dwelling. The blinds at the lower windows were closed. That sharp eyes were watching him from behind them, Nick had not a doubt.

He had waited about ten minutes, when the door of the house was quietly opened and the figure of Estelle, divested of her hat and cloak, appeared on the threshold.

Nick darted noiselessly up the step and joined.

She looked awed and frightened, an apprehension finely feigned, and held up her finger warningly.

"Hush!" she whispered. "Not a sound!"

"Is he here?" Nick murmured, stepping into the gloomy entry.

"Yes."

Estelle silently closed the door and grasped his arm. Nick could feel her trembling, and gave her credit for being a very good actress.

"Where is he?" he whispered.

"In a back room, with a fellow named Staley."

"I know him."

"The door is closed, but you can see the thread of light under it, close to the floor."

"I see it," said Nick, starting as if to move in that direction.

"Wait a moment," Estelle pleaded, detaining him. "Do nothing before giving me time to fly the coop. I must have my cloak and hat."

"Where are they?"

"I'll show you. The fellow who brought me here is named Callahan. He told me to wait for him in another room, while he talked with some friends. I did so, but listened at the rear door till I found out who is in the room. I put out the light in the room where Callahan left me, so that I should not be caught spying if he suddenly showed up. He is still with the others in the back room."

"I understand," Nick whispered. "You're all right, true blue."

"Come with me to get my garments," Estelle murmured, still pressing his arm. "After I slip away safely, you may do what you like."

Nick knew he was about to walk into a trap, but he feared no great personal peril as long as the woman continued to grasp his arm in the darkness.

"Get a move on, then," he muttered. "I'll go with you."

Estelle drew him down the narrow hall, then into one of the side rooms. The darkness seemed dense enough to cut in slices. Nick heard her close the door, then quickly whisper:

"Stand still! I'll turn on the light."

The snap of a switch-key instantly followed, and a flood of electric light filled the room. Before Nick could overcome the momentary blindness caused by the sudden glare, the cold, incisive voice of Gaston Dupont fell upon his ears, as threatening as the click of a revolver, despite its affected friendliness:

"Don't move, my dear Carter! We shall be very sorry to pump you full of lead! Be wise and don't make it necessary!"

Nick stood motionless, not at all surprised, and surveyed the scene upon which he had been led.

It was a square room of tolerably decent appearance. A table stood in the middle of it. The two windows, evidently overlooking the narrow court between the house and the brewery, were masked with thick, dark blankets, tacked above the casings and preventing the escape of the slightest ray of light.

The floor was bare, as well as the faded walls, and was only partly furnished.

Nick found himself confronted by four men—each with a leveled revolver.

Two of them were the defunct bucket-shop firm, Staley and Wade.

A third was a stocky, dark-featured fellow, who, Nick rightly judged, was the rascal who had floored Whitney's head clerk, Talbot, just before the bond robbery.

The fourth was Gaston Dupont, clad as fastidiously as ever, with a smile of mingled amusement, exultation and mockery on his classic, clean-cut face. He stood directly opposite the detective, and bowed with ironical graciousness—when he saw that the advice given him was being followed.

In a chair in one corner of the room sat Tim Callahan, looking grim, doubtful, and apprehensive. He realized better than any man among them how greatly Nick Carter should be feared, let the situation involving him be what it might.

Estelle had drawn near one of the walls, smiling maliciously.

"Really, really, my dear Carter, this is a most charming reunion," Dupont declared, with mocking politeness. "I am delighted, absolutely delighted."

"Yes, so am I," Nick said dryly.

"Place a chair for him, Morgan, like a good fellow—but take care not to get between him and these weapons. He is so impulsive. There is no knowing what he might do. Relieve him of his own, good Morgan, while you are about it. I'm sure he must find them burdensome. If you should discover a pair of handcuffs in his pocket, Morgan, you might adjust them on his wrists, if he will be so good as to put his hands behind him. I know that he will. He is always obliging—under such circumstances. Truly, truly, my dear Carter, I am delighted to entertain you once more."

"That is right, Dupont—once more!" said Nick, with ominous quietude.

He appeared utterly unconcerned, had offered no resistance, but suffered the short, stocky man to steal behind him, remove his revolvers, and then fasten his handcuffs on his wrists, voluntarily putting them behind him.

"Once more, eh?" Dupont laughed derisively. "Don't be absurd, my dear Carter. We shall probably meet many, many times—unless you compel me to do what I threatened in my recent letter. You received it, of course. So glad I happened to have your address. Sit down; sit down, my dear Carter, and we'll talk it over."

Nick took the chair that had been placed behind him.

"Your time will come," he replied pointedly. "The devil, Dupont, always leaves a gapway."

Dupont laughed aloud and took a chair at the opposite side of the square table. Staley, Wade and Morgan took others near him, but Callahan and the woman remained where they were. None of them ventured making any remark, and it was obvious to Nick that they had been instructed to let Dupont do the talking.

The wily rascal seemed to feel sure of himself, of the situation, and that there was absolutely nothing to fear.

"A gapway!" he echoed, still laughing. "Possibly, but it is always fitted with a turnstile. Be careful, my dear Carter, that you don't get caught in it, so caught that you cannot get out."

"I'll risk it," Nick said curtly.

"Yes, no doubt. You are absurdly reckless. If you were only as clever, my dear Carter, as you are daring. It is in that you are lame. You have the persistency of a foxhound, but not the cunning of the fox."

"The fox may double a few times, but the hound finally runs him down," Nick retorted.

"That is the exception, not the rule," Dupont returned, with a covert sneer. "For example, the existing situation. What a very clever game you think you have been playing. Really, I couldn't resist giving you a little rope, to see if you would hang yourself. How successfully, how very successfully, my dear Carter, you have done so."

"Apparently, I admit."

"Yes, to be sure; you cannot well avoid it," Dupont went on glibly. "Who put you up to it? Was it that Central Office ignoramus, Foley? I saw him visit you several days ago. Knowing that my unexpected departure from Sing Sing had not been published, though known at the Central Office, I readily divined the occasion of Foley's visit. I knew that he needed help; that you would be asked to locate me."

"Quite right," said Nick shortly. "I have done so."

"Yes, yes; I expected it," cried Dupont, with a wave of his slender hands. "Did you imagine for a moment, my dear Carter, that I should not see your design in those newspaper stories of Sunday. You wanted me to know, of course, that my good friend Callahan was to be released to-day, that I might promptly keep any appointment I had made with him. How very simple, then, that I should assume that you would shadow him after he left the prison, in the hope that he would lead you to me."

"Very discerning on your part, Dupont, I am sure," Nick dryly allowed.

"The proof of a pudding is the eating," Dupont chuckled vivaciously. "We have you here and that is a sufficient proof of my perspicacity. It was obvious, of course, that you would shadow any person sent to conduct Callahan hither."

"Yes, of course."

"It was doubly good of you, my dear Carter, to invite her into the little game by which you could enter this house," Dupont went on mockingly. "It saved us the trouble of overcoming you outside and bringing you in. And it was so bold on your part, not to attempt to procure assistance. If you had, the trick would have been off. Callahan and my dear Estelle could easily have eluded you. We have had a man watching you from the moment they met, my good friend Morgan. He slipped in through the court."

"Like you, Dupont, he is very clever," said Nick with subtle irony.

"Well, in a measure," Dupont demurred.

"And you have accomplished all this with what object?"

"Dear me, what a question!" Dupont exclaimed, with a laugh. "Really, my dear Carter, after all the interest you have had in this case and the trouble you have taken, I could not resist the temptation to have you present when we made an equitable division of the bonds now in our possession. It will afford you so much pleasure, I am sure, to see them divided among us."

"Yes, indeed, it will."

"I thought so," chuckled Dupont. "That having been done, we will leave you here until to-morrow and go our respective ways. I cannot find it in my heart to seriously harm you. You are so amusing, so diverting at times, that I should hate to think of you as a has-been. It will be time enough for that, my dear Carter, when you become dangerous, a menace worth considering."

"This is very considerate, Dupont, I am sure."

"I knew you would appreciate it."

"I do, indeed."

"We shall leave you here until morning. I will notify your friend of the Central Office, Foley, and he shall come round and release you. What a pleasant meeting it will be. You will have so much to discuss. I am sorry I cannot be with you."

"So am I, Dupont, really," Nick drawled oddly.

"We will talk more of it a little later, and of other matters of mutual interest," Dupont bowed tauntingly. "First, however, we will divide these bonds that have given you so much trouble. I wish to send some of my friends away, that we may not leave in a body."

"You'll leave in a body, all right," thought Nick, content to let the scamp run on in his own fashion for a time.

"Bring them here, my dear Estelle," Dupont added, turning to tre woman. "Bring them here and open the bag. I will superintend the division."

Estelle laughed audibly and hastened into a rear room.

"If you cannot see plainly, my dear Carter, and wish to sit nearer the table, you may do so," Dupont remarked, with a leer.

"I'm near enough," Nick growled. "I can see more than I wish of your rascally business."

"Ah, thank you, Estelle."

The woman had returned, bringing the well-filled leather bag which Nick had seen in the house on Fifty-first Street. She placed it on the table, then produced a small key from a purse taken from her pocket.

Gaston Dupont drew nearer the table and took the key from her hand.

CHAPTER X.

NICK'S FINAL MOVE.

Before Dupont could insert the key into the lock of the bag, Nick Carter leaned forward in his chair and said, with an abruptness that startled every hearer:

"Stop a moment, Dupont!"

Dupont dropped his hand and looked at him sharply.

"Why stop, my dear Carter?" he asked, with sinister intonation.

"I would not open that bag."

"Nor will you. There is not the slightest danger of it."

"On the contrary, Dupont, there is a strong probability of it."

"Nonsense! Why do you say that?" Dupont demanded.

There was a sharper gleam in his eyes, a more threatening ring in his cold voice. The faces of his confederates were taking on expressions betraying rising apprehensions.

"I'll tell you why," said Nick, with subdued austerity. "There are always two sides to a story. I have listened patiently, Dupont, while you told your side. You listen as patiently, now, while I tell mine."

"Your side?"

"Precisely," Nick nodded. "I know that you are a very crafty fellow, Dupont, very crafty."

"Thank you, my dear Carter."

Dupont smiled, but it lacked the true color. His cheeks had gone a bit pale.

"I foresaw that you would, with your rare discernment, suspect my designs in having Callahan released, and in the newspaper stories of Sunday," Nick proceeded sarcastically. "I knew that you would have a spy watching me from the moment I arrived in New York, on that treacherous rascal's track."

"You did, eh?"

"That was confirmed, Dupont, by the presence of this woman in the concert hall, and by the readiness with which she entered into the scheme I suggested. I knew that you had spread a net in which to catch me, and that you were convinced that I was at work alone on the case. I blinded her by pretending I did not recognize her, and by revealing my own identity and designs. She took the bait like a hungry trout."

"That we have you in our clutches, Carter, is enough," Dupont snapped, with a viciousness that betrayed of what he was capable.

"No, Dupont, it is not enough," Nick answered ominously.

"What do you mean by that?"

"You, with all your cunning, have overlooked one possibility."

"What?"

"That I, from the very outset, might be shadowed by my own assistants, which would make it needless for me to seek help after entering the net you might spread, and while under the eyes of your confederates."

"You don't mean——"

"I mean what I say, Dupont," Nick cried, sternly interrupting him. "Long before this they should have located the house. It already may be surrounded, your every avenue of escape blocked. Even now, they may be listening at the windows, ready to respond to—let us see, Dupont! Let us see!"

Nick's forcible utterances, which had served to bring every startled rascal to his feet, suddenly ter-

minated with a whistle that rang with piercing shrillness through the house.

At the same moment, raising one of his feet, he sent the table crashing to the floor, with a violence that compelled each of the rascals near it to leap aside to avoid it.

The disturbance was answered on the instant, from outside, from front and rear of the house.

There was the crash of falling doors, quickly beaten down with axes.

There was the tread of heavy feet, hurrying into the house.

There was the snap of breaking sashes, the crash and clatter of falling glass on the very floor of the room, and the rending of curtains and blankets torn from their fastenings.

It was like the visitation of a cyclone. It began and ended, seemingly, in a moment.

Dupont reached for his revolver, but before he could draw it Callahan was upon him like a wolf on a lamb.

"Hold on!" he roared, furiously. "None of that! We're cornered, but I'm damned if you shall sit me in the electric chair!"

Dupont, livid to the lips, tried vainly to shake him off.

In another moment, the room was filling with plain-clothes men from the Central Office, with Foley at their head.

Through the demolished windows came Chick Carter, Patsy, and Bob Ferret, each in disguise and with a gun in his hand.

Gaston Dupont dropped his weapon and fell back till his shoulders touched the wall.

"You were right, Carter," he cried sneeringly, waving aside the men who would have seized him. "I did overlook one possibility. You have the best of me, temporarily. Permit me to yield as gracefully as possible, since I have no alternative. Excuse me, gentlemen! I am Detective Carter's prisoner, not yours. It is much less humiliating."

Nick Carter laughed audibly, and fastened on the rascal's wrists the handcuffs he had quickly taken from his own.

The round-up, brought about precisely as Nick had boldly intimated, was a complete success, and but very little more need be added; for it was not in the detective's nature to indulge in mockery, nor to defe- winding up his masterly work.

Within ten minutes the entire gang were secured and on their way to the Tombs, much to the satisfaction of all except themselves.

Having another mission to execute, Nick did not deem it necessary to go with them. He turned Dupont and Estelle Venner over to Foley and another of the Central Office men, and saw them taken away to the police headquarters in a hack, manacled to the wrist of each officer.

Not a word passed between the detective and the crook when they parted.

About an hour later, Nick Carter and Chick entered the rooms of Arthur Whitney, to whom they delivered the bag of bonds and related the circumstances bearing upon its recovery.

It is needless to say that Whitney's amazement and gratitude scarce knew bounds; yet the latter found expression in the generous check contained in Nick Carter's mail the following morning.

He showed it to his assistants, remarking with a laugh.

"This lays away over such letters as that received from Dupont. Really, the case was hardly worth it."

THE END.

Anybody would be deceived by the oily, well-mannered rogue who, in the next story, is found among the guests at a house party in the Berkshires. To give you an idea of how slick he is, you are told that he fooled even Nick Carter—for a while. But once the great detective had "sized" him—and it did not take long—the gentlemanly crook ceased to enjoy his visit. Still, it was nip and tuck between Nick and him, particularly after the house had been robbed. "The Garnet Gauntlet; or, Nick Carter Pierces a Double Mystery." That is the title of this excellent story. You'll be very much interested, once you begin the tale, to see how Nick makes out in the hard game which this amazing rascal gives him. Out next week in No. 700.

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THE LITTLE STRIKE BREAKER.

THE notice of a reduction of wages had been posted up so that every worker in the factory was bound to see it as they knocked off at midday.

At first little comment was made—men and women staring at each other blankly—but presently they began to form into little groups, each of which gathered round a speaker. The largest of these groups was by the gate, and the man who spoke there was one likely to create a following. He was tall, spare with years of work, and bent slightly at the shoulders from the same reason. His face was lean and hard, with the fighting light of the roused worker in his gray eyes.

"I tell ee, lads, it canna go on!" he cried fiercely. "Has us been so well paid as to have too much money? We're on'y a small factory, but what's to stop us doin' what other larger ones ha' done?"

"Strike!" some one shouted.

"Ay, strike!" Henry Brawn fairly shouted, his eyes blazing. "Show 'em as we're not machines."

Over in the other groups much the same words were being uttered, and there could be no doubt with regard to the effect they were having upon their hearers.

Gradually the members of the other groups grew less, until practically every worker was clustered round old Henry Brawn. The latter's face was white with passion, the strong lines on it as hard as if cut in stone, and when the bell clanged for work to recommence he shook a clinched fist violently in its direction.

"Ay, we'll answer ye!" he cried, and swung off toward the factory. At the door of it he halted, tore down the notice of the reduction of wages, then turned straight into John Leech's office instead of into the actual works.

John Leech sat at the bare table that served him as a desk. His face was hard, possibly with the effort of fighting against killing competition year after year. Despite its hardness, however, there was nothing brutal in its expression.

"Well?" he asked simply, the end of his pen tapping against his teeth.

Old Brawn strode forward, his face working, and banged the notice down on the desk.

"What's the meanin' o' that?" he cried fiercely.

John Leech's eyes went hard with the fighting light that came into them.

"Surely you can read?" he protested.

"Ay, we can read," Brawn growled, "an' we want 'ter know what it means. We're none too well paid now, an' we won't take less."

John Leech wearily and mechanically scratched figures on a scrap of paper that lay before him, and it almost looked as if he had forgotten the presence of the angry crowd.

"We want an answer," Brawn said sharply.

With something of a start John Leech roused himself, his hand dropped over the notice that lay on the desk, and he held it out toward the man.

"You have it there!" he answered.

Then the workers knew that their first attempt at a protest had failed, and angry growls broke from them. Encouraged by these, old Henry Brawn drew nearer to the desk, shaking his fist in Leech's face. Then it was that the latter leaped to his feet, his right hand closing over the heavy stool on which he sat.

"Get!" he shouted fiercely, his temper roused at last.

The old habit of obedience asserted itself then, but the workers trooped out into the yard again instead of to their benches. Despite their retreat before Leech's anger, they were just as determined not to submit to a reduction of wages. They were not aware that even at the lower rate John Leech would have some difficulty in paying them.

Out in the yard the workers did not loiter for long, and little was said. All were determined that the strike should go on unless John Leech gave in.

Back in his office John Leech sat with a bank passbook before him, and the more he went over the figures in it the deeper became the lines between his eyes.

He picked up the telephone receiver and gave a number. His face was curiously tense as he waited to learn that he was connected.

"That you, Holmes?" he asked at last. "Yes, this is Leech. I say, my people have gone on strike because I have reduced their wages. Why? Oh, I reckon I'd have to go without food myself if I didn't. What I want you to do is to try and get a couple of score of hands for me by to-morrow. I shan't really keep them on, but I want to teach these people of mine a lesson. Good! You think you can. Good-by!"

John Leech hung up the receiver, locked up his passbook, and rose to his feet. With a sigh he passed out into the empty yard, but his face was very stern as he walked briskly off in the direction of Hyde Park, where his home lay.

* * * * * * *

Henry Brawn rather hesitated as he drew near to the little cottage in which he lived, wondering how his old woman would receive the news that he had come out on strike. His cottage lay outside Leeds, and had originally been occupied by an agricultural laborer. Its prettiness, its difference to the grime of Leeds itself, had appealed to Brawn, and so, despite the long tramp it meant to and from his work, he had now occupied it for some time—besides, he had reckoned that it would be good for his only child, a girl of nine.

With a squaring of his shoulders, Brawn pushed open the little gate and entered the garden. As a rule, his daughter came hurrying to meet him, but this afternoon he reached the front door without any sign of her. Before he could open the door some one did so from within. It was a youngish man, with the unmistakable air of a doctor about him.

"Needn't be alarmed at seeing me, Brawn!" he said pleasantly.

By an effort Brawn pulled himself together. His face had gone rather white, and the hand that touched the doctor's arm was none too steady.

"It's not—Jenny?" he asked.

"Yes; diphtheria," the young doctor answered. "Your wife will tell you all about it—I am in a hurry."

Before Brawn could ask more the doctor was gone, and he could do nothing but turn into the cottage. The knowledge that Jenny, his only child, was ill had dazed him, and he scarcely knew what he was doing. In the little front room his wife met him. There were tears in her eyes, and her face was pale.

"You know, man?" she asked simply.

"Yes," he answered huskily. "What danger is there?"

"The doctor says he thinks it'll be all right," the woman answered, in a trembling voice. "It's to-morrow night that'll be the time—for good or ill—he says. If she pulls through that all she'll need is the best of food——"

"Best of food," the man echoed mechanically.

"And to go away to the coast," the woman concluded.

"Go away to the coast," Brawn echoed; and there was something in his voice and face that caused his wife to start and grip his arm.

"What's the matter, Harry?" she cried.

Brawn squared his shoulders, and passed a hand wearily over his eyes.

"There won't be money for the things the doctor's ordered," he answered, in a strangely hard voice. "We're out on strike."

The woman raised a hand as if some one had struck her, then it fell heavily to her side. Her white face had gone even more ghastly.

"What are you goin' to do?" she asked, in a kind of frightened whisper.

But Brawn did not answer, for he had stepped softly through into the little room in which the child lay ill. His wife made a movement to follow him, but drew back as something very like a sob reached her.

* * * * * * *

John Leech sat in his office and took down the names of the new hands that Holmes had sent him up from a neighboring town to take the place of the strikers. The factory owner looked haggard and worn, as well he might when the task he was going to have with these new hands is considered. If only he had had a competent overseer matters would have been all right.

The last of the newcomers entered the office, gave his name and his particular class of work, and went out again. Then John Leech rose to his feet to enter the factory and undertake the work of overseer on——"

A fierce shouting, the cry of a man in pain, came from outside, and the next moment a stone came hurtling through the office window.

"If they try that I'm sorry for 'em!" Leech growled, hurrying out into the yard.

As he reached it a man burst from among the crowd of strikers assembled at the gates, and came at a run toward the building. The strikers made a move to follow, but at sight of John Leech a little of his old authority asserted itself, and they held back.

"What do you want?" John Leech demanded.

Brawn wiped the blood away from his face—his temple had been cut by a stone—and looked quietly into his employer's eyes.

"I want to come back, sir," he answered simply.

Leech looked keenly at the man, wondering if it could be a trick to upset the factory in any way—even, perhaps, make an attempt to burn it down—but he quickly saw that Brawn was in deadly earnest. The man's face was drawn and haggard, and was made to look even grimmer by the blood on the one side of it.

"Why?" Leech asked.

"Want work, sir," the man answered simply.

"And you aren't afraid of what the others"—Leech nodded toward the angry-eyed crowd by the gate—"will do to you?"

"No, sir."

"Then get to work," Leech ordered, with a sigh of relief; "I can do with you."

All through the day Brawn worked, and as Leech watched him instructing the new hands, giving help wherever wanted, doing the labor of at least two men, he wondered what had come over him. When evening came Leech himself walked from the factory with him, feeling that the strikers would not attempt violence under the circumstances.

"Scab!" was shouted fiercely from all sides. "Traitor!"

So far as Brawn was concerned, he did not seem to hear it, for he strode on without turning a hair, his face grim and set. One of the strikers, bolder than the rest in the presence of Leech, flung a stone that struck Brawn sharply on the shoulder. He started as a man might who has been pricked by a pin, but kept on at the same steady pace.

At the end of the road Leech touched him on the arm.

"I must leave you here," he said; adding rather anxiously: "You aren't afraid they will do you an injury?"

"No," Brawn answered; but his tone was so mechanical that Leech doubted whether the man had really understood.

* * * * * * *

From the windows of Brawn's cottage lights shone steadily, despite the fact that the hour was nearly midnight, and the cost of oil in such a household was a consideration. Behind the thin linen blinds the shadows of moving figures could now and again be seen—especially in the room where Jenny lay ill.

Outside the cottage, beyond the garden, out in the road, other shadows lurked—the shadows of grim-faced men, who held heavy sticks in their hands. A few of them had their faces smeared with soot, as if to disguise them, but most had made no attempt to cloak their identity. It was easy enough to recognize them as the strikers from Leech's factory.

"What's time, lad?" one of the men asked at last.

"Nigh midnight," the man beside him answered, rising to his feet.

The example of the one man was followed by the rest, until a score of men moved almost noiselessly into the little garden that lay before the cottage. The man who led them was Nat Long, one of the oldest workers at the factory, and if grimness and determination counted for anything, the strikers could not have had a better leader.

Long knocked sharply on the door, but had to repeat his summons twice before any notice was taken of it. Then the door was opened, and Brawn, shading his eyes with his hand, looked out. He drew back a bit at sight of the men armed with cudgels, but quickly pulled himself together.

His face was the face of a man who has not known sleep for a long time.

"What's the game, lads?" he demanded, in a voice that had grown curiously level.

"You ought ter know, you cur!" Long answered fiercely. "You're a traitor, and——"

Brawn threw up a hand for silence, and there was something in the rough gesture which commanded respect.

"I am not asking what I am, but what you mean to do!" he said firmly.

A chorus of growls rose from the strikers.

"Tell him, Long!" one of them cried. "He'll know soon enough!"

The man Long thrust farther forward, and his heavy stick swung menacingly in his hand.

"Oh, we'll tell you, quick!" he snarled. "We're goin' ter thrash thee first, then pull the house down round yer ears! We're goin' ter show you what happens ter scabs!"

The cries of the other strikers showed that this was no idle boast, yet Brawn never stirred.

"We're goin' ter turn you out o' this!"

"You're not," Brawn interrupted quietly.

Long laughed and swung his cudgel, as if to test the weight.

"Who's to stop us?" he growled.

"If two of you will come inside I will show you," Brawn answered; and there was a little quiver in his voice at last. "Oh, you needn't be afraid—I shan't try and hurt you!"

Long stepped slowly forward, and an elderly striker followed him. Into the cottage they went, and through to the room in which Jenny lay. She was there now, the mother beside her, sleeping peacefully.

"That is why I went back to work," Brawn explained, in a husky whisper. "When I got home yesterday I found the lass ill. They told me she must have the best of everything—go away for a change." The man's eyes blazed. "She's goin' ter get it so long as I can work!"

Just for a moment the two strikers stood shamefaced; then they turned and tiptoed from the room. As they left, Brawn turned toward the bed.

"How is she, mother?" he asked softly.

"She's asleep, Harry," the woman answered, finger to lips. "She's on the mend."

As the woman finished speaking the door of the room opened, and Long came sheepishly in.

"Mate," he said huskily, as Brawn turned toward him; "the boys wanted ter say as they take it back 'bout you bein' a scab, an' want you to accept that—fer the kid."

Before Brawn could protest, Long had thrust a handkerchief into his hand and hurried from the room. Mechanically Brawn unfastened the knot that held the corners of the handkerchief together, and a little shower of silver fell to the floor.

Something very like tears were in Brawn's eyes, stern-faced worker though he was, as he hurried toward the door. He looked out into the little garden—even down the road—but only a few dark shadows in the distance might have been the men he sought.

The strikers had not waited for thanks.

* * * * * * *

The next day John Leech was amazed to find the old hands ready to meet him halfway and go back in their places. He wanted to inquire the reason, but had sense enough not to, being thankful to have them back at any cost. He made a concession by paying full rates again. It was no easy job, but he pulled through.

It was months later that he learned why the strikers had changed their attitude, and one of Jenny's most prized possessions is a small gold watch which bears the inscription: "From J. L. to the Little Strike Breaker."

EDISON GLIMPSING THE FUTURE.

Thomas A. Edison, the great inventor, has been talking to the *Independent* about some of the wonders and problems which make this old world such an interesting place in which to live. Radium, for instance, moves him to enthusiasm, the greater perhaps because even Edison himself hasn't got on confidential terms with the substance.

He has some of it, though. "Oh, yes," says he: "I have a spinthariscope, which is a tiny bit of radium, of a size that will go through the eye of a needle, mounted over a piece of willemite. It has been shooting off millions of sparks for the six years that I have had it, and I expect it will be shooting sparks the same way for thousands of years.

"While only small quantities of radium have been isolated, it exists everywhere in water, rock and soil. The possibility of harnessing this force for our use is somewhat of a speculation. A radium clock has been made, and it will go several hundred years without winding.

"The problem of fuel is one of the big problems of the future. We may find out to-morrow how to get all the power from our fuel—we get only fifteen or twenty per cent. now—and, on the other hand, it may take a long time. Water power is being rapidly developed. Maybe the utilization of the tides will follow. More practical are windmills connected with storage batteries to lay up the energy of the winds in electrical form.

"Sun engines are promising contrivances. In Arizona there is a thirty-horse-power sun engine run by focussing the rays on water and using a steam turbine. In steaming volcanoes there is power which might be converted into electricity and distributed.

"To get rid of friction in our machines is one of the future problems. The only machine without friction that we know is the world, and it moves in the resistless ether.

"The monorail does not appeal to me. It was a fundamental mistake that our railroads were built on a four-foot-nine-and-one-half-inch gauge instead of a six-foot gauge, which we will probably have to come to yet.

"The aëroplane of the future will, I think, have to be on the helicopter principle. A successful air machine must be able to defy the winds. If Wright's aëroplane had one-twentieth of its surface the wind would not affect it.

"The helicopter principle is the only way to rise above atmospheric conditions. By increasing the velocity of propeller, revolutions the size of the machine can be diminished, and thereby we vanquish the hostility of the wind. A helicopter could have foot-size planes distributed on a one-hundred to one-hundred-and-fifty-foot circle and controlled from the centre by wires.

"Chemical food has been worked out pretty well, but it won't be a commercial proposition. There are lots of synthetic things being made, but you can't beat the farm as a laboratory in that line.

"The clothes of the future will be so cheap that every young woman will be able to follow the fashions—and there will be plenty of fashions. Artificial silk that is superior to the natural article is now made of wood pulp. I think that the silkworm barbarism will go in fifty years, just as the indigo of India went before the synthetic production of indigo in German laboratories.

"In two hundred years, by the cheapening of commodities the ordinary laborer will live as well as a man does now with two hundred thousand dollars annual income. Automatic machinery and scientific agriculture will bring about this result.

"Not individualism, but social labor, will dominate the future; you can't have individual machines and every man working by himself. Industry will constantly become more social and interdependent. There will be no manual labor in the factories of the future. The men in them will be merely superintendents, watching the machinery to see that it works right.

"The work day, I believe, will be eight hours. Every man needs that much work to keep him out of mischief and to keep him happy. But it will be work with the brain, something that men will be interested in, and done in wholesome, pleasant surroundings. Less and less man will be used as an engine or as a horse, and his brain will be employed to benefit himself and his fellows."

HE MADE A DISTINCTION.

A member of a fashionable club in London lost his umbrella at the club rooms. Being resolved to draw attention to the matter in an effective manner, he caused this notice to be put up in the hall:

"The nobleman who took away an umbrella not his own on such a date, is requested to return it."

The committee took offense at this statement, and summoned the member who had made it before them.

"Why, sir," they said, "should you have supposed that a nobleman had taken your umbrella?"

"Well," replied the member, "the first article in the club rules says that 'This club is to be composed of noblemen and gentlemen,' and since the person who stole my umbrella could not have been a gentleman, he must have been a nobleman."

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